
Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is a viral disease characterized by inflammation of the liver. There are many types of hepatitis, the most common being hepatitis A, B, and C. They differ in their methods of transmission, prevention, and treatment. Hepatitis A is contracted primarily through contaminated food or water, while hepatitis B and C are spread by bodily fluid contact. This article will focus on hepatitis C, one of the most common forms of hepatitis in the United States.

Like some forms of hepatitis, hepatitis C can damage and destroy the liver, thus affecting its ability to regulate many important body functions such as storage and release of sugar, removal of the toxins in drugs, production of bile for digestion, and breakdown of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is currently no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C Transmission

The virus can only be transmitted via contact with infected blood or other bodily fluids, such as semen and vaginal secretions. Hepatitis C is not spread by coughing, sneezing, breast-feeding, sharing eating utensils, or casual contact. People who are at risk include:

- Intravenous drug users
- People who have unprotected sex with an infected person
- Health-care workers
- Hemodialysis patients
 - Hemodialysis is a treatment for kidney failure. A patient's blood is pumped into an artificial kidney to filter metabolic waste products then returned back to the body. If the hemodialysis machine is contaminated with the hepatitis C

virus, patients can become infected.

- Persons who received blood transfusion before July 1992
 - Blood donation prior to July 1992 was not screened for hepatitis C, hence the increased risk of transmission.
- Persons who received tattoos or body piercings with unsterilized needles

Symptoms of Hepatitis C

In most cases, individuals with hepatitis C do not have any symptoms. In the acute stage, however, patients may experience the following:

- Jaundice (yellowish skin and eye whites)
- Headache
- Vomiting
- Nausea
- Weakness and fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Gray stool
- Dark-colored urine

The acute stage can last several weeks to months. Those who do not recover from the acute stage may develop chronic hepatitis. The infection can cause cirrhosis and may lead to liver failure or cancer.

Diagnosis

Blood tests can identify the infection. In addition, ultrasound, x-rays, and liver biopsy may help your doctor detect liver problems.

Treatment

People with a mild case of hepatitis C may not need special treatment. Adequate bed rest and a well-balanced diet are usually enough to overcome the infection. To

protect the health of the liver, avoid alcohol, large amount of vitamins, and the use of over-the-counter medications and herbal supplements. Also, ask your doctor whether you need to be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.

For people with a more severe case of hepatitis C, there are currently two Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved treatments. They both aim to remove the hepatitis C virus from the infected blood. Consult your doctor to see which treatment is best for you.

1. Monotherapy

Interferon is a type of protein that the body produces in response to infection. The use of interferon injection can help the immune system fight against the virus. The frequency of shots depends on the patient's condition. Side effects include flu-like symptoms such as fever, headache, vomiting, and loss of appetite.

2. Combination therapy

A more effective treatment is a combination of interferon and ribavirin. Ribavirin is an oral medication that enhances the effectiveness of interferon and blocks the reproduction of the virus. However, the combination therapy is not for everyone. For instance, ribavirin is dangerous for anemic patients and pregnant women.

The effectiveness of the above treatments varies. Some Hepatitis C patients find it difficult to tolerate side effects and may have to stop treatment. The use of non-traditional and alternative medicine have not been proven to be safe or effective in the treatment of hepatitis C. Be sure to discuss with your doctor before attempting to self-treat.

Prevention

As mentioned above, there is no vaccine currently available to prevent hepatitis C. To protect yourself or others from contracting the virus, follow these recommendations:

- Practice safe sex by using condoms
- Do not share razors, toothbrush, nail files, scissors, or contaminated personal items
- Do not share needles

For more information about hepatitis C, contact the following agencies:

American Liver Foundation
www.liverfoundation.org
800.GO.Liver (465-4837)

Hepatitis Foundation International
www.hepfi.org
800-891-0707