Hepatitis C

Facts about a liver disease affecting thousands of people

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is the liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) which was first identified in 1989. HCV is spread by direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected person.

In the early phase of harm caused to the liver by an offending agent, there is usually an initial phase when the liver enlarges in size, just the same as an inflamed ankle swells up after being sprained. This acute phase of inflammation lasts from a few days to some weeks, but usually subsides. The patient may notice something was wrong but most of the time this goes undetected. Very rarely, this initial inflammation is so severe as to be life threatening (*fulminant hepatitis*). After this initial inflammation subsides the liver usually gets back to normal function. From now on, any damage to the liver depends on the course the disease takes which depends very much on the causative agents and other factors. Therefore, in some individuals the infection may enter a carrier state, while in others, the infection remains active with continuing damage to the liver. A minority whose hepatitis is active will develop serious liver disease and will need specialised treatment.

Previously known as "non-A, non-B hepatitis", hepatitis C differs from hepatitis A, which is spread through eating or drinking contaminated food or water. Hepatitis B is caused by an entirely different virus, which is also spread through blood contact with blood or body fluids of an infected person.

How does someone get Hepatitis C?

Some people are more likely to contract hepatitis C than others. This virus can be easily transmitted by:
sharing injecting equipment (not only needles and syringes, but possibly also spoons, filters and water);
infected transfused blood (a very remote possibility in developed countries where use of blood or blood products is strictly regulated);
infected transplanted organs;
tattoos and body piercing acquired with non-sterile equipment.

Those who share injecting equipment repeatedly may get re-infected several times, sometimes with different strains of the virus. Contracting hepatitis C through unprotected sex appears to happen rarely, unless the person is HIV positive. In this case, because of the reduced efficiency of the immune system, safer sexual practices using condoms gives the best protection against all sexually transmitted diseases including HIV, hepatitis B and C.

Transmission of the virus from mother to baby, either during pregnancy or around the time of birth, occurs in about 30% of babies born to hepatitis C positive mothers. These babies will test positive during the first months even if they are not infected by the virus. This happens because the mother's antibodies are passed on to the baby and giving a false positive results. The only reliable test for hepatitis C is one which identifies the genetic material of the virus.

Hepatitis C carries should be instructed to dispose of blood soaked materials themselves and not pass on the task to others. Open wounds should be covered and instruments that may be contaminated by blood such as razors and/or toothbrushes should be kept for the patient's own personal use. There is no need to segregate eating utensils, cups, bowls, etc.

What are the symptoms?

Many people with hepatitis c experience no symptoms at all and may feel quite healthy. Others may develop fatigue, jaundice – or yellowing – of the eyes and skin, and loss of appetite.

Most people infected with HCV are unaware they have it and can carry it unknowingly for decades. Only a blood test can detect hepatitis C virus infection. If you think you may have been exposed to HCV through high-risk behaviour, major surgery, a blood transfusion or blood products, and are concerned, you should see your physician and discuss whether or not you should be tested.

Treatment

Only one in ten people whop test positive for hepatitis C will need immediate treatment; the rest will need to be monitored at intervals, often for several years. Alpha interferon is the standard treatments and it is given in the form of injections each week usually for 6 to 12 months. Those given the drug might suffer flue-like symptoms as a side effect that might be confused with opiate withdrawal symptoms. Half of those treated with interferon get better but half of these will later relapse, suggesting a one in four success rate.

It is important however to realise that the consequences of being a chronic carrier are very variable. Some people will remain well but be infective. Others will develop chronic liver disease. In some cases, liver disease may be present with normal liver function.

It is important for people living with hepatitis C to implement lifestyle changes including:

- Maintaining a nutritious, well-balanced diet;

- Avoiding the use of alcohol, even social drinking. It is important to remember that alcohol is the commonest cause of abnormal liver function and may account for the abnormal results. The key message for individuals with chronic hepatitis is that they need to stop all alcohol intake to preserve their liver.
- Immunization against other types of viral hepatitis (hepatitis A and B). A second infection virus can cause your liver disease to become worse. All hepatitis C infected individuals should be immunized against both hepatitis A and B.

For those whose hepatitis C is more advanced, drug treatment may be appropriate and must be administered after careful assessment by your physician.

What happens as the disease progresses?

Most people with chronic hepatitis C feel well for many years. However, chronic hepatitis C can lead to cirrhosis, which is scarring of the liver. This occurs in approximately 20% of patients and usually takes years to develop. In severe cases, however, hepatitis C may lead to liver cancer or death. For these patients, liver transplant may be the best treatment.

How can I protect others?

People who have been diagnosed with hepatitis C need not become socially isolate, but the following are common-sense precautions that should be taken to prevent spreading the virus:

- Do not give blood or donate your organs
- Do not share razors or toothbrushes
- If you use drugs, do not share needles or other drug-related equipment
- Inform health professionals who care for you and may be exposed to your blood, that you have hepatitis C
- Although sexual transmission is rare, inform your sexual partner(s) that you have hepatitis C and take appropriate precautions.

Conclusion

What needs to be stressed and underlined is that prevention of hepatitis C is simple and easy to adhere to. Once the disease is contracted, neither the patient nor family members should be scared because minimal changes in the lifestyle are required not to spread further the disease.