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Hepatitis C: What You Should Know

Part One: The Basics And Who Is At Risk

May is National Hepatitis Awareness Month in the U.S. This is Part One of a three part series on hepatitis C.

The word hepatitis, when used alone, means "inflammation of the liver." There are different causes of hepatitis, but one very common form is caused by viral infection. Currently, five distinct viruses have been identified and are the subject of intense research: hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E. Other viruses are also under study. Hepatitis C (HCV) is considered by many in the medical community to be the most dangerous.

HCV is one of the top causes of chronic liver disease in the U.S. According to the U.S. National Institutes of Health, HCV causes 8,000 to 10,000 deaths annually, and about four million Americans are currently infected or have previously been infected with the virus. HCV can lead to cirrhosis of the liver, liver failure, and liver cancer. It is one of the most common reasons for liver transplants in the U.S.

In some cases, a person infected with HCV may have few or no symptoms, only mild liver damage, and may never suffer serious consequences from the infection. On the other hand, some patients suffer severe symptoms and develop debilitating liver disease. Approximately 20 percent of HCV infected individuals develop cirrhosis or liver failure within 10-20 years.

Who Is At Risk?

HCV is transmitted by blood and blood products. Blood transfusions (prior to 1992, when reliable testing of donated blood began) and the use of nonsterile.

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previously-used needles and needle-sharing among IV drug users have been the most common means of transmission of HCV in the U.S. Risks for acquiring HCV include:

- Injecting illegal drugs and sharing needles or syringes (one time is enough for transmission)
- Getting a tattoo or body piercing of any kind with nonsterile equipment
- Receiving organs from HCV infected donors
- Using an infected person's toothbrush, razor, or anything that may have blood on it
- Accidental pricks from a needle with contaminated blood, mainly a risk for health care workers
- Emergency medical technicians and firefighters who may be exposed to blood from accident victims
- Frequent exposure to blood products, such as people with hemophilia and chronic kidney failure.
- Infants born to HCV infected mothers

Some studies have suggested that others may be at risk:

- People who engage in high-risk sexual behavior with multiple partners and have sexually transmitted diseases
- People who "snort" or sniff cocaine, using equipment that is shared. Cocaine use can cause damage and bleeding to nasal membranes, and tiny amounts of blood may be passed on to another user

Studies of sexual transmission of HCV between monogamous partners are inconclusive. Very few partners of HCV patients become infected with the virus (one survey showed less than 5%), and out of those, many had other risk factors for infection. Current medical advice, for those in a monogamous relationship with one HCV infected partner, is that sexual practices need not be changed. The uninfected person should be tested, however, especially to alleviate worries that the HCV infected person may have.

Anyone, however, who is in close contact with a HCV infected individual should remember that the virus is transmitted by blood, so precautions (such as not sharing toothbrushes) are recommended. People with multiple partners should follow [safer sex](#) practices.

The most important recommendations for anyone with HCV are

- Avoid alcoholic beverages of any kind, including beer or wine (alcohol stresses the liver)
- Get regular check-ups with a doctor who specializes in liver diseases (a hepatologist)
- Always check with a doctor before starting any new medication (some may have adverse affects on the

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liver)

- Consult with a doctor about getting vaccinated for both hepatitis A and B.

Unfortunately, no vaccination for HCV is available.

Part Two: Symptoms and Diagnosis

Coming Soon:

Part Three: Treatments and Research

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