

Hepatitis C

"He sent forth his Word and healed them and rescued them from the grave." Psalm 107:20

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) has infected millions of people in the U.S., with about 2,000 new cases every month. While the incidence is way down from 20 years ago, due to increased awareness and education, it is still a serious condition we should all be aware of.

Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver. Most of us don't think about our liver, and what it actually does. It is quite an amazing organ, and is the largest one in the body. It filters damaging substances (such as alcohol) from our blood and neutralizes poisonous substances. This amazing organ stores important vitamins and iron, converts glucose for energy, and manufactures about 80% of the body's cholesterol.

Hepatitis C is often called a silent killer, because 80% of the people infected have no symptoms while the disease damages their liver. Those who do have symptoms may have jaundice (skin yellow in color), fatigue, dark urine, abdominal pain, or nausea. Because serious damage can occur without any warning, those at risk should have a simple blood test to see if they are infected with HCV. A person will test positive about one to two weeks after being infected.

HCV is spread when the blood or body fluids from an infected person enters another's body. Most infections are due to illegal drug use, but are definitely not confined to just these people. Those at risk include anyone who:

- Has been notified that they received blood from a donor who later tested positive for HCV
- Has a tattoo or body piercing
- Has shared a needle to inject drugs (even once)
- Has been on long term kidney dialysis
- Has received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant before July 1992
- A child born to a woman with HCV (5 out of 100 babies will be infected this way)
- Health care workers who have an accidental needle stick or body fluids splashed into their eyes or mouth

HVC cannot be spread through casual contact such as hugging or sharing a drinking glass, and should never be a reason to exclude someone from school, work, or child care. There are many things an infected person can do to increase his chances of a partial or full recovery from this serious condition.

There is a new vaccine that will protect against Hepatitis A and B, but not for Hepatitis C. It is vitally important that we all protect ourselves. Never share anything that may have someone else's blood on it. This includes needles, syringes, razors, or toothbrushes. Consider the risks if you wish to get a tattoo or piercing—check out the health practices of anyone before allowing them to place a needle into your skin.

For those already diagnosed with Hepatitis C, there are steps that can be taken to restore their health. The most important one is to avoid all alcohol, because this speeds up damage to the liver. Also, regular check ups with a physician are vital. It's essential that patients be completely honest with their doctor, sharing information about any medications they take, including over the counter drugs and herbals. In addition, it is critical that a person's lifestyle is known to his doctor, so proper treatment and health information can be given. All information given to physicians, or any health care professional, is protected by law. This information is strictly confidential, and is vital for proper treatment.

The treatment of choice for people with chronic Hepatitis C consists of injections of Interferon and possibly Ribavirin for 6-12 months. Interferon is a protein already present in the body which helps fight infection. Ribavirin helps fight the virus. Studies have shown that 6 months after treatment 97% of these patients have normal liver enzymes! Equally important, a person must get plenty of sleep, water, and nutritious food—every day. This combination therapy can be used with children as young as 3 years of age.

According to the government, about 4 million people are infected with Hepatitis C, and about 25,000 will die each year. Education and treatment are the keys to reducing this statistics—so be informed and be safe.

For more information: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMHT0022399/> or

<http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-topics/liver-disease/hepatitis-c/Pages/ez.aspx>

Blessings,
Nurse Karen