

HEPATITIS C FACT SHEET

Overview

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The liver is a vital organ located in the upper right part of the abdomen; it filters toxins from the blood. Hepatitis C is one of several types of hepatitis that can cause illness and is one of the most common blood-borne infections in the United States. Most HCV infections are chronic (long-term). Chronic HCV can cause cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure and death.

Signs and Symptoms

People with new infections usually do not have symptoms or have very mild symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Fever;
- Dark urine;
- Stomach pain;
- Loss of appetite;
- Nausea and vomiting;
- Joint pain; and
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes).

If symptoms do occur, they usually take six to nine weeks to appear.

Causes and Transmission

HCV is spread by contact with the blood of an infected person. This usually happens by:

- Injection drug use;
- Receiving donated blood, blood products, or organs before 1992;
- Being stuck by a needle, especially in a health care setting; or
- Being born to an infected mother.

It is uncommon, but possible, to become infected by sex with an infected person or by sharing personal items such as razors or toothbrushes.

Risk Factors

There are several groups at risk for being infected with HCV:

- People born between 1945-1965 (“Baby Boomers”);

- Current or past injection drug users, including people who only injected one time and/or injected many years ago;
- People who received donated blood, blood products, or organs before 1992;
- People who receive long-term hemodialysis treatment;
- People who are tattooed or receive a body piercing with unclean needles; and
- Children born to mothers infected with HCV.

Complications

Chronic HCV infections can take 20-30 years to develop. Complications from this are usually related to the liver, such as cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer and liver failure but can also include other conditions, including developing diabetes, kidney diseases or other conditions. Someone with chronic HCV will be contagious for as long as the infection continues, which may be lifelong.

Tests and Diagnosis

Diagnosing hepatitis C requires a blood test. Talk to your doctor if you suspect that you have been exposed to HCV or are experiencing symptoms of HCV infection.

Your doctor may also want to remove a small sample of your liver for testing (called a liver biopsy) to find out if you have liver damage.

Treatments

There are several therapies and new medications that can slow down liver damage or even cure a hepatitis C infection. People with HCV infections should consult a health care provider with experience treating this disease.

Prevention

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV.

The only way to prevent HCV is to avoid risky behaviors:

- Do not shoot drugs. If you do shoot drugs, stop and get into a treatment program. If you can't stop, never reuse or share syringes, water or drug works.
- Do not get a tattoo or body piercing with an unclean needle. Make sure the tattoo artist or piercer follows good health practices, such as hand washing and using gloves.
- If you are a health care provider, follow barrier precautions and safely handle needles and other sharps.

Disease Patterns

There are an estimated 3.5 million people in the United States who have chronic HCV infections. Most infections are among Baby Boomers, and most of them do not

know they're infected. Today, the most common way people become infected is through injection drug use.

Pennsylvania has some of the highest HCV infection rates in the United States. In the past 10 years, approximately 15,000 people were reported to have hepatitis C each year. The rate of infection among young adults (<35 years old) has increased dramatically in the past three years.

Additional Information

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HCV/index.htm>

Screening recommendations for Baby Boomers:
<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/HepatitisCTesting/index.html>

Information on hepatitis risks for people who inject drugs:
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/viral-hepatitis-very-real-consequence-substance-use>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information.

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