

UNDERSTANDING

HEPATITIS C

*Information for the
General Public*

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Inflammation of the liver is medically described as hepatitis and may be caused by viruses, disorders of the immune system and drugs. The Hepatitis C virus is one of several viruses which may cause progressive liver damage and which affects the quality of an individual's life to varying degrees. Following infection with Hepatitis C, from whatever source, an individual may clear the virus within weeks and remain immune to re-infection or may become a "carrier" of the virus. Such persistent infection with Hepatitis C may be associated with a chronic hepatitis which can lead to progressive scarring of the liver (fibrosis) and eventual cirrhosis. Current treatments for Hepatitis C - anti-viral agents - are only successful in eliminating the virus in 15% to 20% of individuals.

The liver - an essential organ

The human liver lies in the right side of the abdomen under the rib cage. The liver's function is to maintain appropriate levels of nutrients in the blood for use by the brain, muscles and other tissues. It is an essential part of the immune system and produces essential proteins such as coagulation factors, and its actions affect many different organs of the body. The liver has a large reserve and its functions may not be obviously impaired until advanced disease is present. Thus some individuals may have serious liver disease without any significant symptoms.

Liver disease

Liver disease may result from infection with viruses, from the use of drugs (including alcohol), from disorders of the body's immune system or any combination of these factors. Liver disease affects different people in different ways. Some individuals may live quite active and normal lives and others may complain of chronic fatigue, skin irritation, abdominal swelling, disturbance of sleep and difficulty in concentrating. Some patients with advanced liver disease (cirrhosis) may develop liver cancer. While some forms of chronic liver disease respond to medical treatment, others do not and these individuals may develop progressive failure for which the only treatment is liver transplantation.

Viruses are common causes of infection

All viruses are infectious. Some viruses cause only short-term (acute) illnesses and have no long-term (chronic) effects. Other viruses, such as Hepatitis C, may not be eliminated by the immune system and can persist indefinitely.

Viral Hepatitis

Viruses are infectious particles which can replicate very rapidly to produce large numbers of new virus particles. Viral hepatitis is the medical term for liver disease caused by liver viruses such as Hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E. Some of these viruses have been recognised for decades while others, such as the Hepatitis C virus, have only recently been identified. Other as yet unidentified viruses affecting the liver may exist.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

The physical symptoms of Hepatitis C infection vary considerably from individual to individual. Some people have virtually no complaints, while others have severe symptoms which impact greatly on their social and occupational lifestyles. The symptoms of the Hepatitis C virus infection, rather than those attributable to liver disease, include loss of appetite, fatigue and weight loss. These symptoms may last for days or weeks, and will eventually disappear when the virus infection clears. When patients develop symptoms related to Hepatitis C chronic liver disease, the liver disease will usually be at an advanced stage. These symp-

Some symptoms of Hepatitis C Virus

- *Chronic fatigue which fluctuates in severity and which may be incapacitating*
- *Joint/muscle pains*
- *Skin rashes*
- *Irritations/dryness of the eyes*
- *Abdominal discomfort*
- *Depression*
- *Fluid retention*
- *Sleep disturbance*
- *Difficulty in concentration*
- *Jaundice*
- *Muscle wasting*

toms include fluid retention, muscle-wasting, jaundice, sleep disturbance and an inability to concentrate.

How is Hepatitis C passed from one person to another?

The virus has spread to a large number of people world-wide through contact with blood containing the Hepatitis C virus.

Throughout the world, people who have injected illegal drugs are at a high risk of developing Hepatitis C, by virtue of sharing contaminated needles. In Ireland, this is the most common route of infection.

Some medical and dental staff have become infected with Hepatitis C by inadvertently pricking themselves with contaminated needles.

Hepatitis C may also be acquired on a sporadic basis, that is, without an identifiable source. It may also be acquired, although rarely, by individuals who have had tattoos, body piercing, electrolysis and acupuncture procedures.

In Ireland in 1994, a national Hepatitis C screening programme identified a number of women who had contracted Hepatitis C as a result of the administration of Hepatitis C-contaminated Anti-D Immunoglobulin during or at the end of pregnancy. Additional Hepatitis C screening programmes identified individuals who had acquired Hepatitis C as a result of receiving contaminated blood transfusions. A number of people with haemophilia, and a number of kidney patients were also infected with Hepatitis C through contaminated blood and blood products. **The current risk of contracting Hepatitis C from blood products administered in Ireland by medical personnel is considered minuscule.**

Prevention of Spread of Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a serious infection carried in and transmitted through blood containing the Hepatitis C virus. Contact with blood should, therefore, be avoided.

Be careful - about your own and other people's blood

This common-sense rule applies to everyone. It protects us all from a variety of infections including Hepatitis C. Parents should inform children about the need to avoid blood contact. Remember that sensible precautions are also necessary when on holiday, at home or abroad.

People in direct contact with the public such as employers, staff in the medical, dental, catering and beauty industries, teachers, scout leaders and sports coaches should all be aware of the importance of avoiding blood contact.

Be careful - about needles

If you inject yourself or a family member (for example for diabetes, haemophilia or while using interferon), be careful to dispose of the syringes and needles in a proper Sharps Container. **Never pick**

up a discarded needle or syringe. Warn children never to touch discarded needles or syringes. Tattoos, body piercing and acupuncture are all possible avenues of infection with Hepatitis C.

Never permit anyone to puncture or graze your skin with an implement of any kind without being completely certain that it is not only clean, but sterile.

Injecting illegal drugs, using contaminated syringes, is a definite way of contracting many serious diseases, including Hepatitis C. Needle exchange programmes cut down on the risks of infection. **If you are injecting drugs, get help from one of the drug treatment groups.** They care about you and want to help you.

Be careful-about your sexual activity

Hepatitis C may spread during heterosexual or homosexual activity. Semen and vaginal fluids may contain Hepatitis C. General advice on lowering the risk of Hepatitis C transmission includes the use of **condoms, particularly in casual sexual**

contact. These give some protection to men and women. Sexual intercourse during menstruation increases the risk for both partners.

Any sexual activity that draws blood or causes a tear in the vagina, anus, rectum or mouth may allow for passage of the Hepatitis C virus. Genital sores or warts are another possible source of infection. Oral sex, if there is a cut on the lips or mouth or bleeding gums, may spread the virus.

Social contact does not spread Hepatitis C

Being in the presence of someone with Hepatitis C can never be infectious. To avoid infection with Hepatitis C, **avoid contact with infected blood, not contact with people.** Social contact, i.e., holding hands, kissing or hugging does not spread Hepatitis C. Coughing and sneezing are not means of infection. Hepatitis C is not spread by food. Using common toilet or bathroom facilities, or swimming in pools, does not spread Hepatitis C. The virus does not usually pass from mother to child.

Do you know someone with Hepatitis C?

Many of us know someone who has Hepatitis C. Some of us have a neighbour or friend or family member who has Hepatitis C. You are not at risk of contracting the disease from everyday interaction. **If you have a neighbour, friend or family member with Hepatitis C, they need your support and goodwill.** People with Hepatitis C are under physical and psychological stress. They need friendship, not rejection. They are entitled to fair treatment and acceptance by the community at large.

Hepatitis C is not HIV or AIDS

Hepatitis C is not HIV or AIDS. Sometimes, Hepatitis C is called HCV. This is short for Hepatitis C Virus. It does not mean that Hepatitis C has any relation to HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). People with Hepatitis C do not go on to develop either HIV or AIDS from Hepatitis C.

Further information

READING

Living with Hepatitis C a booklet published by the Department of Health and Children for people with Hepatitis C, their family and friends.

This booklet is published by the Department of Health and Children
in association with the
Consultative Council on Hepatitis C

