

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a serious disease caused by a virus (HCV) that attacks the liver. The liver is one of the largest organs in the body. It cleans the blood and helps to digest food.

Hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States. The virus is spread when blood or body fluids of an infected person enter the body of a healthy person. Hepatitis C is one of the leading causes of lifelong (chronic) liver disease.

Certain types of cancer are known to develop from hepatitis C. This includes liver and lymphoma. These hepatitis C-associated cancers can occur as the first cancer (primary cancer) or in patients with different types of malignancies (secondary cancer). It may take 20 years or more after infection for permanent liver damage to be seen.

Risks

Anyone can get hepatitis C. Those at higher risk include:

- People born between 1945-1965
- People who share needles or who have a history of using injected illegal drugs
- People who received blood transfusions before 1992
- Prior organ transplant recipients before July 1992
- Dialysis patients
- People with HIV infection
- People with undetected liver problems
- Infants born to mothers who have hepatitis C
- People who have unprotected sex with an infected partner
- Health care workers, emergency medical and public safety workers

Prevention

There is no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C. However, you can lower your risk by doing the following:

- **Do not** use illegal drugs. Never share syringes, needles, or other drug equipment.
- **Do not** share personal items that might have blood on them. Examples include: toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers and files, scissors, etc. Avoid contact with menstrual blood.
- Cover open wounds.
- If you get body piercing or tattoos, be sure tools have been sterilized.
- If you have hepatitis C, **do not** donate blood, body organs, other tissue or semen.
- Practice safe sex and always use a condom.

Symptoms

Most people have no symptoms. If they do, symptoms may include:

- Loss of energy
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea or pain in the abdomen
- Yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Dark urine
- Clay-colored stools

If the hepatitis virus is suspected, a blood test is needed to confirm a diagnosis. It will show if you have been infected. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends adults, ages 18 to 79 years, get a one-time blood test for hepatitis C. All new patients at MD Anderson are tested for hepatitis C.

Treatment

Hepatitis C is curable. Medicines are used to treat hepatitis C. They include a combination of anti-viral medicines.

Living With Hepatitis C

It is important for you to learn how to live with the disease. Many people enjoy long lives without becoming seriously ill. Take these steps:

- Have regular blood tests to check liver function.
- Tell your doctor about any new symptoms.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.
- Ask your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medicine. Many are harmful to the liver.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- **Do not** donate blood or organs.

Long-Term Effects

Most people with hepatitis C will have it the rest of their lives. Some will develop chronic liver disease. This may be fatal.

A person with hepatitis C may need a liver transplant.

Hepatitis C Reactivation

Hepatitis C can interfere with cancer treatment. Some infected cancer patients might progress faster than normal due to cirrhosis. When the immune system is weakened during chemotherapy or with certain cancers (lymphoma), hepatitis C virus in the liver cells of a person without signs

or symptoms can cause active liver disease. This is called “hepatitis C reactivation.” Hepatitis C reactivation can be prevented with proper screening and medicine.

Internal Medicine Center

Infectious Diseases Clinic

Main Building, Floor 9, near Elevator A
Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
713-563-3955 or 713-792-2340

Internal Medicine Center

Hepatology Clinic

Main Building, Floor 7, near Elevator A
Monday through Friday
8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
713-792-2330