

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of March 30, 2015 – Hepatitis C

I think we have all noticed the enormous number of television commercials blitzing our senses, advertising an array of medications. Many times when the commercial ends, I have found myself asking what was being advertised! However, I recently took notice of a commercial that was touting its success for the treatment of Hepatitis C. Hepatitis C?! We have probably all heard about Hepatitis A and B (The latter being an occupational disease where many health care workers are exposed and can receive a vaccine), but how many other hepatitis types are there? Well there are five main types, all with such creative names as A, B, C, D, and E.

The word “Hepatitis” originates from the Ancient Greek, *hepar*, meaning liver and the Latin *itis*, meaning inflammation. So regardless of what form of hepatitis one has, the main symptom is an enlarged or inflamed liver. This condition can cause a reduced blood-flow from the portal vein, which can lead to numerous health effects. Hepatitis can be caused by excessive alcohol consumption, certain drugs (acetaminophen, ibuprofen, birth control pills are just a few) , as well as bacterial and viral infections. While there are five types of hepatitis, health care professionals have focused on Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C are diseases caused by three different viruses. Although each can cause similar symptoms, they have different modes of transmission and can affect the liver differently. Hepatitis A (a sexually transmitted disease) appears only as an acute or newly occurring infection and does not become chronic. People with Hepatitis A usually improve without treatment. Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C can also begin as acute infections, but in some people, the virus remains in the body, resulting in chronic disease and long-term liver problems. There are vaccines to prevent Hepatitis A and B; however, there is not one for Hepatitis C; and, if a person has had one type of viral hepatitis in the past, it is still possible to get the other types.

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that ranges in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness. It results from infection with the Hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is spread primarily through contact with the blood of an infected person and can result in an acute or chronic condition.

An infection of an acute case of Hepatitis C virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to HCV. However, most people, once contracting the acute infection, the chronic condition is likely (80%) and can last a lifetime leading to serious liver problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and even cancer.

In 2012, there were an estimated 21,870 cases of *acute* Hepatitis C virus infections reported in the United States, while an estimated 3.2 million persons in the United States have *chronic* Hepatitis C virus infection; and most people do not know they are infected because they don't look or feel sick!

Today, most people become infected with the Hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before 1992, when widespread screening of the blood supply began in the United States, Hepatitis C was commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Fetuses can also contract the disease from a mother who has Hepatitis C. Hepatitis C virus is not spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing. It is also not spread through food or water (which is different from other Hepatitis diseases).



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Less common, a person can also get Hepatitis C virus infection through sharing personal care items that may have come in contact with another person's blood, such as razors or toothbrushes, as well as having sexual contact with a person infected with HCV; however, this last vector risk is believed to be low. As one would expect, the risk increases for those who have multiple sex partners, or have a sexually transmitted disease, engage in *rough* sex (causing transmission via blood), or are infected with HIV (which lowers one's resistance to fight infections).

While not considered to be a likely cause of Hepatitis C transmission, tattooing and body piercing are potential risk-factors. This happens when poor infection-control practices are used, and since tattooing and body piercing are becoming more popular the risk is increasing, especially with unregulated tattooing and piercing, such as in prisons and other informal or unregulated settings.

Chronic Hepatitis C is the leading cause of cirrhosis and liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplantation in the United States. Approximately 15,000 people die every year from Hepatitis C- related liver disease. Most people with chronic Hepatitis C do not have any symptoms (70% - 80% of Hepatitis C cases) until liver problems have developed. In persons without symptoms, Hepatitis C is often detected during routine blood tests to measure liver function and liver enzyme (protein produced by the liver) levels.

While the typical symptoms may not be prevalent, infected persons can display fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, joint pain, and jaundice (yellow color in the skin or eyes)

One of the most common diagnostic checks to assess proper liver function (and therefore, indicate possible hepatitis disease) is a liver-enzyme analysis. However some infected persons have liver enzyme levels that are normal for over a year.

Acute infection can clear on its own without treatment in about 25% of infected persons; however, experts do not fully understand why this happens. In cases where the condition persists, medical treatment does reduce the risk of acute hepatitis C becoming a chronic condition.

Today, there are several medications available to treat chronic Hepatitis C, many being more effective and having fewer side effects than previous options. It should also be pointed out that both acute and chronic conditions are treated with the same medications.

People with chronic Hepatitis C should be monitored regularly by a health care professional that is knowledgeable in Hepatitis C. Infected persons should avoid alcohol because it can cause additional liver damage. They also should check with a health professional before taking any prescription pills, supplements, or over-the-counter medications, as these can potentially damage the liver. If liver damage is present, a person should check with his or her doctor about getting vaccinated against Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B.

From an occupational health risk, the CDC has stated that infected persons should NOT be excluded from work, school, play, child care, or other settings as there is no evidence that people can get Hepatitis C from food handlers, teachers, or other service providers without blood-to-blood contact.

Light travels faster than sound. This is why some people appear bright until they speak Steven Wright (American Actor, Comedian and Writer)

