



## HEPATITIS C

### What is hepatitis C (HCV)?

The liver, the second largest gland in the human body, has many important jobs. It helps the blood to clot, changes food into energy and cleans harmful substances from the body. Hepatitis or inflammation of the liver causes damage to the liver and interferes with its ability to work. Certain medications, toxic chemicals, disorders of the gall bladder or pancreas, abuse of alcohol and infection are among the over 100 causes of hepatitis.

There are several different viruses that may cause an infection of the liver, commonly referred to as viral hepatitis. Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). *In the United States, four million Americans are infected with the hepatitis C virus.* It is the leading reason for liver transplants. Specific blood and liver tests are required to diagnosis hepatitis C infection and to evaluate for the presence and severity of liver damage.

### What are the symptoms?

Signs and symptoms of hepatitis C are very similar to those of other types of hepatitis. Symptoms may include: loss of appetite, vague abdominal discomfort, nausea and vomiting. Few individuals have jaundice which is yellowing of the skin and/or eyes.

Over 85% of people who become infected with hepatitis C will develop chronic disease. Chronic, or life-long disease, means that means they “carry” the virus and can pass it to others. The incubation period (time from exposure to the virus until onset of symptoms) may be 2 weeks to 6 months. Most individuals have no symptoms and have no long-term effects. They feel well and lead very normal, active lives. Others with chronic infection may go unnoticed until 20-30 years after exposure when complications of liver disease, such as cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure, develop.

### How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread through exposure to the blood or other body fluids from an infected individual. Almost half of all persons with chronic hepatitis C have no known history of exposure to the virus. However, there are certain behaviors or events that put individuals at increased risk of hepatitis C. You are at risk of HCV infection if you:

- received a blood transfusion or organ transplant (e.g., kidney, liver, heart) before July 1992
- were treated for clotting problems with a blood product before 1987
- ever injected street drugs, *even one time*
- were ever a health care worker and had frequent contact with blood in the work place, especially accidental needle sticks
- ever had sex with a person infected with HCV
- have multiple sex partners
- have evidence of liver disease (such as ongoing abnormal enzyme levels)

Hepatitis C is not spread by sneezing, coughing, or sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses. It is also not passed by casual contact such as hugging or shaking hands, or by food or water.

## Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?

Yes. There are several medications available to treat chronic Hepatitis C. New treatments appear to be more effective and have fewer side effects than in the past. The medications are expensive and generally given in combination. Goals of treatment are to contain the virus and to reduce development of cirrhosis, liver cancer, and liver failure which requires a liver transplant. Eradication (or elimination) of HCV from the body is the ultimate objective. Many factors influence a person's ability to respond to treatment. Decisions to start anti-viral therapy for hepatitis C are usually made in consultation with a gastroenterologist or liver specialist (hepatologist) and determined on a case-by-case basis

There is no vaccine available to prevent hepatitis C. However, a person who has hepatitis C can still get other types of viral hepatitis. Routine medical follow-up is essential along with vaccinations against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

## How can a person with HCV prevent spreading it to others?

- Do not donate your blood, body organs, sperm or other tissue
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, or other personal articles that may have your blood on them
- Cover cuts or open sores on your skin
- If you inject drugs, stop and get into a treatment program. If you can't stop, use a clean needle and "works" (cotton, spoons, syringes, water) each time and **DO NOT SHARE THEM**.
- If you have one steady sex partner, there is a very low chance of giving Hepatitis C to that partner through sexual activity. However, if you want to lower the small chance of spreading HCV to your partner, you may want to use latex condoms. Ask your doctor about having your sex partner tested.
- Limit sexual partners. If you have sex with multiple partners, inform them that you have Hepatitis C, and always use barrier methods of protection, such as latex condoms.

## What if a person with HCV is pregnant? Will the virus harm the baby?

Five of every 100 infants born to HCV-infected women become infected. This occurs at the time of birth and there is no treatment to prevent this from happening. However, infants infected with HCV at the time of birth seem to do very well in the first few years of life. The affects of the virus as they grow older is being studied. Medical follow-up is important for the baby. Breast feeding is not considered a risk for spreading HCV.

## How can someone with hepatitis C take care of his or her liver?

- Schedule regular check-ups with their doctor
- Be well-informed. Contact available resources for information. Join a support group.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Assure room is well-ventilated (or wear a mask) when using aerosol cleaners, paint sprays, bug sprays or other chemical spray products.
- Tell your doctor about **all** medicines, even over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements that you are taking. Many can be very harmful to the liver!
- Eat healthy foods. Get adequate rest and sleep. Exercise regularly.
- Complete the immunizations for hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HEPATITIS:

#### **American Liver Foundation**

NATIONAL HELPLINE @ 1-800-GO-LIVER (1-800- 465-4837)

REGIONAL HEARTLAND DIVISION (Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky) @ 1-877-548-3730

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

**Minnesota Department of Health** (<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/hepc/index.html>)