Understanding Hepatitis

Hepatitis is a term used to describe inflammation (swelling) of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by many different factors including viral infections, parasites, bacteria, chemicals, auto-immunity, drugs or alcohol. Of these, viral infection is the most common cause of chronic (long-term) hepatitis. Both hepatitis B and C can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer and liver failure, despite the fact that hepatitis B can be prevented by vaccination, and hepatitis C can be cured through treatment in many cases.

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is one of the most common viral infections in the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated two billion people have been infected with hepatitis B with more than 240 million people having a chronic hepatitis B infection, which can lead to developing cirrhosis, liver failure and liver cancer. Approximately 600,000 people die every year due to the consequences of hepatitis B. ¹

The hepatitis B virus is highly infectious – 50 to 100 times more infectious than HIV.² Hepatitis B is commonly spread from mother to infant during birth, through unprotected sex or through the use of shared, inadequately sterilised syringes/needles. However, the virus is not spread by contaminated food or water nor through casual contact in the workplace.¹ The hepatitis B virus can survive for up to one week outside of the body.³

Symptoms of Hepatitis B

Symptoms occur in about 70% of adults who have hepatitis B.¹ They may take several months after a person has been infected to appear, and include:¹,⁴

- Yellowing of skin or eyes (jaundice)
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite or nausea
- Darkening of urine
- Fever
- Aching joints

It is important to note that more than 90% of healthy adults who are infected with hepatitis B recover and are completely rid of the virus within six months.¹

**Diagnosis**

A number of blood tests are available to diagnose and monitor people both with acute and chronic hepatitis B infections. The formal laboratory diagnosis of hepatitis B focuses on the detection of the hepatitis B surface antigen, HBsAg. A person is diagnosed with chronic hepatitis B if HBsAg remains in the blood for six months or more, and is the key predictor for developing chronic liver disease in the future.

**Preventing and Treating Hepatitis B**

People can protect themselves from hepatitis B by being vaccinated. The hepatitis B vaccine is 95% effective in preventing infection.⁵ However, for those already infected, treatment is the only option.

The main goal of treatment is to stop the hepatitis B virus from multiplying, and ultimately, put the disease into remission. Medicines for hepatitis B include pegylated interferon and antivirals. Treatment can slow the progression of cirrhosis, reduce the risk of developing liver cancer and improve long term survival.⁵,⁶

**References**

5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hepatitis B, Epidemiology and Prevention of Vaccine-Preventable