

Understanding Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is a condition of the liver. In fact, the term ‘hepatitis’ literally means ‘inflamed liver’. Hepatitis can be caused by many different things 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 and liver cancer, and can even result in the need for a liver transplant.

The good news is that hepatitis B can be prevented by vaccination, and hepatitis C can be cured in many cases.

What Is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that affects more than 180 million people worldwide.¹ Actually, according to the World Health Organization, there are more than four times as many people living with hepatitis C than with HIV.² People infected with the virus typically experience liver damage over 10–50 years, and the virus can lead to liver scarring, liver damage, and potentially, to liver cancer or liver failure.

Hepatitis C is spread through direct contact with infected blood. Blood transfusions and the use of shared, inadequately sterilised syringes/needles and equipment used during tattooing, piercing and acupuncture have been the main routes of infection in the western world. The virus is rarely transmitted through sexual contact, but high-risk sexual activity increases the risk of infection. In developing countries, unscreened blood and blood products are also major sources of transmission.

Symptoms of Hepatitis C

Only 30–40% of people in the acute phase of hepatitis C infection have symptoms. Of these, many experience only mild, non-specific and intermittent symptoms.³ The lack of specific symptoms has led to hepatitis C being described as a silent killer and may contribute to the low detection rates.

People may experience non-specific symptoms including

- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Muscle and joint pains
- Anxiety/depression
- Mild tenderness in upper-right area of the abdomen

Unfortunately, many people with chronic hepatitis C may not experience any symptoms at all.

Treating Hepatitis C

Unlike hepatitis B, there is no vaccine to protect against hepatitis C. The primary goal of treatment is to achieve a 'sustained virological response', which means that there is no detectable virus in the bloodstream 6 months after the end of treatment. 'Cure' is an appropriate word to use for those who have achieved a sustained virological response.

Depending on the type of hepatitis C, cure rates range from 52–90% with the current standard of care – pegylated interferon and ribavirin combination therapy.^{4–8} However, individual characteristics of the person being treated will determine the likely response to treatment.

References

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