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 C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that affects approximately 150 million people worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately three to four million people are infected with the virus each year. Approximately 20-30% of people chronically infected with hepatitis C experience liver damage after 20 years with hepatitis C-related liver disease estimated to cause the deaths of 350,000 people annually.

Hepatitis C is commonly spread through direct contact with infected blood. This can occur through blood transfusions, the use of shared, inadequately sterilised syringes/needles and transmission from mother-to-child at birth.

Symptoms of Hepatitis C

Following infection with the virus, approximately 80% of people do not show any symptoms. Of the people that do show symptoms, these tend to be mild, non-specific and intermittent. The lack of specific symptoms has led to hepatitis C being described as a silent killer and may contribute to low detection rates.

People may experience non-specific symptoms including fatigue, loss of appetite, muscle and joint pains, anxiety/depression and abdominal pain.
**Diagnosis**

Recombinant immunoblot assay (RIBA), enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and ribonucleic acid (RNA) testing are commonly used to confirm diagnosis of hepatitis C infection. RIBA or ELISA are used to identify whether a person has antibodies against the hepatitis C virus in their blood, which indicate whether that person is or has been previously infected. RNA testing is the key tool in hepatitis C diagnosis as it can detect and measure the amount of virus in the blood. Given there are six genotypes of the hepatitis C virus, this information is crucial for doctors in being able to choose the necessary treatment and treatment duration for the patient.

**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 six 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 hepatitis C genotype, cure rates range from 52–90% with the current standard of care pegylated interferon in combination with the antiviral ribavirin. In recent treatment advances, antiviral medicines called protease inhibitors are now being used in combination with pegylated interferon and ribavirin, which has further improved cure rates in patients with hepatitis C.

However, individual characteristics of the person being treated will determine the likely response to treatment.

**References**

4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hepatitis C FAQs for the Public -


