Hepatitis C Prevention and Testing

Think about it.

Talk about it.

Protect yourself and others.

Hepatitis C (sometimes called HCV) is a virus that infects the liver. There are several types of hepatitis. Hepatitis C is one of the most common types. It causes inflammation and other damage to the liver. Inflammation caused by the hepatitis C virus can lead to scarring or fibrosis. When the liver is damaged by scarring and fibrosis a condition called cirrhosis can develop.

How do you get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is found in the blood. It is spread when the blood of an infected person gets into the bloodstream of another.

How do I know if I have hepatitis C?

There is a blood test that can show whether or not you are infected with hepatitis C. Your doctor or other medical professional can order this test if it is appropriate for you.

Should I be tested?

To decide whether or not you should be tested for hepatitis C, you must first consider your risk. You may be at especially high risk for hepatitis C if you have ever:

- had a blood tranfusion in the U.S. before 1992 or outside the U.S. at any time
- shared needles to inject drugs, pierced any body parts, or have been tattooed
- shared "straws" for snorting cocaine or other drugs
- been a hemodialysis patient
- worked at a job that exposes you to human blood (such as a health care worker)
- been in contact with the blood of someone who has hepatitis C

If you think you may be at risk for hepatitis C, contact your doctor or medical professional to discuss getting tested.

Is hepatitis C spread sexually?

Hepatitis C can be spread by sex, but this does not happen very often. Long term sexual partners of people with the hepatitis C virus rarely test positive for the virus. People who have had unprotected sex with many partners may be at somewhat higher risk of infection. To reduce the small chance of getting hepatitis C this way, and to protect yourself and your partner from other sexually transmitted diseases, use condoms for anal and vaginal sex. You might also consider avoiding sex if you or your partner is menstruating, or if one of you has open sores or cuts on the genitals.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C has been called the "silent epidemic." A person can have the virus for many years and look and feel healthy. One can have the virus without knowing it and spread the infection to others. In most cases there are no symptoms until one has developed serious liver damage or cirrhosis.

Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis C?

There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A and B, but not for hepatitis C.

What happens when people become infected with the hepatitis C virus?

Of 100 people who become infected with hepatitis C:

- 15 to 25 will be cured without treatment
- 75 to 85 will remain infected

Of those infected, some will never develop liver damage, even after 20 to 30 years.

Liver damage develops slowly, over many years or decades. For most, the damage will not be serious.

Twenty percent of those infected over a long period of time (over 20 years)

develop cirrhosis. People who develop cirrhosis are at risk for liver failure and liver cancer. The longer one is infected, the more likely serious liver damage will develop.

People who drink alcohol regularly are much more likely to develop liver damage than those who don't drink.

Prevention

Prevention is the best way to avoid problems from hepatitis C. To prevent hepatitis C:

- do *not* share needles for drug use, tattoos, or piercing
- avoid sharing razors and toothbrushes
- cover open cuts and wounds
- do *not* share "straws" for snorting cocaine or other drugs
- practice safer sex (see *Is hepatitis C spread sexually?*)

Other resources

For more health information, check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*, listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-33-ASK ME, visit our Web site at *www.kp.org*, or contact your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor.

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