

Hepatitis C

Transmission

Hepatitis C (HCV) is transmitted when the infected blood of one person gets into the blood stream of another person. Prior to 1992, persons receiving blood transfusions or other blood products were at risk. New screening tests have been used in the United States since 1992 to screen blood. The majority of HCV is currently transmitted through the sharing of needles and needle sharing equipment (works). Health care workers who have been stuck by a needle or cut with other contaminated instruments may be at risk, although the risk is fairly low. Studies show the transmission of HCV through sexual intercourse is possible, but less common than direct exposure to HCV infected blood. The virus can also be passed to a baby during pregnancy or delivery.

Incubation

Two to twenty five weeks although the average is six to nine weeks.

Typical Symptoms

Most people who are infected with the hepatitis C virus do not have symptoms and lead normal lives. If symptoms are present they are generally mild flu-like symptoms, dark urine, light stools, jaundice, fatigue, and fever.

Diagnosis

A simple blood test will tell if you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. More specific blood tests can assist in determining the status of the infection. There are three stages. Approximately 15% of persons with HCV are able to clear HCV from their system without medical treatment, known as resolved. Persons may be in an acute stage in which the virus is rapidly attacking the liver. Persons in the acute stage may have symptoms but the majority are asymptomatic. The virus may also be in a chronic stage during which time the virus is slowly attacking the liver. Most persons with HCV are in

the chronic stage. It may take years (two decades or more) to develop serious liver problems and most never do.

Treatment

There is no cure for HCV. There are treatments available to help reduce the amount of virus doing damage to the liver. A balanced diet and exercise are also helpful in fighting the infection. Refraining from alcohol is critical. The combination of alcohol and HCV accelerates the progression of liver disease. New and improved therapies are in development.

Prevention

Do not share needles or "works." Do not share personal items which could be contaminated with blood (i.e. razors, toothbrushes). Avoid unprotected vaginal, oral, and anal sex. Clean up spilled blood with bleach and wear gloves when touching blood.

Danger

Even with treatment, some persons may develop cirrhosis, liver cancer and ultimately, liver failure. Of the estimated 4 million persons infected with HCV in the United States, approximately 10,000 die each year from liver failure.

Vaccine

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.