



HEPATITIS C VIRUS (HCV)

What is HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver caused by the Hepatitis C Virus. This inflammation can result in serious liver damage. Eighty-five percent of persons infected with Hepatitis C develop chronic Hepatitis. Hepatitis C is now the major reason for liver transplantation in the United States.

How common is Hepatitis C?

This year alone, some 30,000 Americans will become infected with Hepatitis C in the United States. If the body does not clear the virus in six months, the infection is said to be chronic.

Who is at risk for Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is transmitted primarily by direct puncture of skin. Injection drug use accounts for greater than 50% of chronic infections. Other risks include: blood transfusion prior to 1992; occupational exposure (health care workers); hemodialysis patients; those with high-risk sexual activity; and tattooing or body piercing with contaminated equipment.

What are the symptoms?

Some people have loss of appetite, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, vague stomach pain and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes). Some people do not have any symptoms.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms may occur from two weeks to six months after exposure, but usually within six to nine weeks. Liver cirrhosis and permanent liver damage from Hepatitis C may not be evident for up to 20 years after the initial exposure to the virus.

When and for how long is a person able to spread Hepatitis C?

A person with Hepatitis C is contagious one or two weeks before symptoms appear and during the entire time the person is ill. About 50% of the people with Hepatitis C become chronic carriers.

Can Hepatitis C be prevented?

There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C. A healthy lifestyle reduces the chances of infection. Avoid illegal injection drugs, intranasal cocaine use and contact with other people's blood. Practice safe sex and limit sexual partners. Avoid sharing razors, toothbrushes, pierced earrings, needles and syringes. Make certain needles for body piercing and tattooing are properly sterilized.

How is Hepatitis C diagnosed?

Doctors can order blood tests to identify individuals who have the Hepatitis C Virus.

Is there a medical treatment for Hepatitis C?

Treatment for Hepatitis C is recommended only in a selected group of infected persons. Vaccination against Hepatitis A and B is recommended, since a liver affected by Hepatitis C is more susceptible to Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B.