



Health News from the DCF Medical Team

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus that sometimes results in an acute illness, but most often becomes a chronic condition that can lead to cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. The virus is found in the blood and liver of people with the Hepatitis C infection. Some people can feel sick while others can be healthy for years. Hepatitis C can be either “acute” or “chronic.” Approximately 75%–85% of people who become infected with hepatitis C virus develop chronic infection.

Acute hepatitis C virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis C virus. For most people, acute infection leads to chronic infection.

Chronic hepatitis C virus infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the hepatitis C virus remains in a person’s body. Hepatitis C virus infection can last a lifetime and lead to serious liver problems and can result in long-term health problems, or even death. Chronic hepatitis C virus infection can lead to the need for a liver transplant.

How is hepatitis C Spread?

- Direct contact with blood or body fluids from an infected person through sharing needles with a person who has the Hepatitis C virus.
- Sharing a personal item that has blood on it, such as a toothbrush or razor.
- Tattooing, body piercing and acupuncture needles that have not been sterilized.
- Mothers who have the hepatitis C virus can pass it on to their babies at birth.
- Having sexual contact with a person infected with the hepatitis C virus increases the risk of becoming infected. The risk increases for those who have multiple sex partners or have a sexually transmitted disease.

What are ways hepatitis C is not spread?

Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact; hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing; sharing food; sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding; holding hands and is also not spread through food or water.

What is the risk of a pregnant woman passing hepatitis C to her baby?

Hepatitis C is rarely passed from a pregnant woman to her baby. About 4 of every 100 infants born to mothers with hepatitis C become infected with the virus. The risk becomes greater if the mother has both HIV infection and hepatitis C.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Approximately 70%–80% of people with acute hepatitis C do not have any symptoms. Some people, however, can have mild to severe symptoms soon after being infected, including fever; fatigue; loss of appetite; nausea; vomiting; abdominal pain; dark urine; joint pain; and jaundice (yellow color in the skin or eyes).

How is hepatitis C treated?

There is no medication available to treat acute hepatitis C infection. Doctors usually recommend rest, good nutrition, and fluids. Each person should discuss treatment options with a doctor who specializes in treating hepatitis. People with chronic hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and evaluated for treatment. The treatment most often used for hepatitis C is a combination of two medicines.

Is it possible to get over hepatitis C?

Yes, approximately 15%–25% of people who get hepatitis C will clear the virus from their bodies without treatment and will not develop chronic infection. Experts do not fully understand why this happens for some people.

What blood tests are used to test for hepatitis C?

Several different blood tests are used to test for hepatitis C. A doctor may order just one or a combination of these tests.

References:

- Massachusetts Hepatitis C Hotline: 1-888-443-HepC (4372)
- Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HepatitisC.htm