

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus which causes liver disease. About 170million people worldwide have chronic hepatitis C infection. In the UK as many as 250,000 to 600,000 people are thought to be infected. In some areas of the world infection may be very common, for example about 10% of the population in Pakistan and Egypt. Up to 1 in 5 patients with chronic hepatitis C will develop cirrhosis of the liver. Hepatitis C related cirrhosis is the most common reason for liver transplantation within the USA and Europe. Once cirrhosis develops there is an increased risk of liver cancer.

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through blood to blood contact with someone who is infected with the virus. The most common routes of infection are:

- Blood transfusions prior to 1991 or blood products prior to 1987
- Medical or dental procedures in countries without adequate sterilisation of equipment and high rates of infection
- Tattoos or piercing with un-sterile equipment
- Occupational exposure, particularly healthcare and emergency workers
- Sharing toothbrushes/razors etc where there is a risk they have come into contact with infected blood
- Any history of intravenous drug use or sharing straws while snorting drugs
- Sexual spread (low risk, but may account for up to 3% of infections)

How long does infection last?

For around 20 – 25% of people who come into contact with hepatitis C their immune system will clear the virus from their body, however the majority of people will be unable to get rid of the virus from their body and go on to develop chronic hepatitis C.

Symptoms

Most people with hepatitis C will have no symptoms. For many years, possibly 20 – 30 years the virus can be damaging the liver silently, without the person knowing. If someone does have symptoms they may have fatigue, muscle pain, abdominal pain and with cirrhosis jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes) may occur.

Diagnosis

A diagnosis of hepatitis C is made using a blood test. This is not a routine blood test but if a doctor notices that liver function tests are raised indicating inflammation within the liver then a screen for hepatitis viruses is usually carried out. In addition testing for hepatitis C should be done if anyone has a history of the above risk factors. A liver specialist will be able to explain the implications of the tests as they are carried out.

People with chronic hepatitis C are often recommended by their specialist to have a liver biopsy. This involves taking a small piece of liver tissue and examining it in the laboratory, this will tell the doctor the extent of the liver damage caused by the virus. However in certain cases a liver biopsy can be substituted with transient elastography, a test which measures the amount of scarring in the liver

Treatment

At present treatment for hepatitis C involves the use of two antiviral drugs to try to get rid of the virus from the body. There are six different strains of hepatitis C virus, and depending on which strain of the virus the person is infected with and the amount of virus before starting treatment will determine both the length of treatment and the chances of success with treatment. The minimum period of treatment is usually 6 months, but in special cases can be up to 18 months. At present not all patients have success with treatment. Active research is on going to develop new, more effective drugs. It is important for someone considering treatment to be under the care of a liver specialist who is experienced in the treatment of hepatitis C and its complications as well as being able to explain treatment fully and monitor the patient appropriately.

Prevention

Unlike hepatitis B there is no vaccination for hepatitis C. The best way to avoid becoming infected with the virus is to avoid any of the risk factors mentioned above. In terms of sexual transmission, if there is a long term steady relationship no changes in sexual behaviour are usually necessary.

If you would like more information on hepatitis C then please contact the Liver Unit at the Wellington Hospital on 0207 586 7156 or via e-mail at David.Morrison@HCAHealthcare.co.uk

For more detailed information on the treatment of hepatitis C then please see our Viral Hepatitis Treatment Unit website