

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is the name of a family of viral infections that affect the liver. The most common types are Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C. These diseases are caused by three different viruses. Although each can cause similar symptoms, they have different modes of transmission and can affect the liver differently. Hepatitis A appears only as an acute infection and does not become chronic. People with Hepatitis A usually improve without treatment. Hepatitis B and C can also begin as acute infections, but in some people, the virus remains in the body, resulting in chronic disease and long term liver problems. There are vaccines to prevent Hepatitis A and B, but there is not one for Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that ranges in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness that attacks the liver. Hepatitis C is primarily spread through contact with the blood of an infected person. Hepatitis C infection can last a lifetime and lead to serious liver problems such as cirrhosis or liver cancer.

An estimated 2.7 to 3.9 million people in the United States have chronic Hepatitis C. Today, most people become infected with the Hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before 1992, when widespread screening of the blood supply began in the United States, Hepatitis C was commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants.

Talk to your doctor about being tested for Hepatitis C if any of the following are true:

- you were born from 1945 through 1965
- you are a current or former injection drug user, even if you injected only one time or many years ago
- you were treated for a clotting problem before 1987
- you received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- you are on long term hemodialysis treatment
- you have abnormal liver tests or liver disease
- you work in health care or public safety and were exposed to blood through a needlestick or other sharp object injury
- you are infected with HIV

Chronic Hepatitis C can be treated. There are several medications available to treat the disease, including new treatments that appear to be more effective and have fewer side effects than previous options. If liver damage is already present, a person should check with his or her doctor about getting vaccinated against Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B. For a complete list of medications used to treat Hepatitis C, visit www.fda.gov. Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccines are available at all PharmaCare locations. Contact Lisa Bohrer, R.N.,BC for more information at 301-689-2909.

This article was submitted by Lisa Bohrer, R.N.,BC, the Community Health and Wellness Manager and Certified Travel Medicine Specialist, for the PharmaCare Network. For more information, contact her at 301-689-2909 or lbohrer@3ipc.com.