



UNDERSTANDING VIRAL HEPATITIS

What is viral hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Viral hepatitis is inflammation of the liver caused by infection with a virus. A virus is an infectious agent that needs to enter a living cell before it can multiply. Inflammation of the liver may be caused by many other agents, for example, alcohol, poisons, as well as some medications.

What causes viral hepatitis?

There are several viruses that may infect human liver cells, such as Hepatitis A, B, C, D, E and G. Hepatitis A and Hepatitis E are caused by viruses. Infection with these viruses occurs as a result of the contamination of food or drinking water. The virus is spread orally and can give rise to mild, moderate or rarely, a very severe illness. Total recovery is usual and re-infection should not occur. Hepatitis A and E tend to occur in epidemics.

Hepatitis B, C, D and G are all spread via blood-to-blood contact. In the case of Hepatitis B, other tissue fluids are also infectious. Sexual transmission of Hepatitis B is the most common form of spread in the western world. This is because Hepatitis B can be found in semen. Sexual transmission of Hepatitis C is much less common. Hepatitis D is quite rare in North America and only occurs in patients who are also infected with Hepatitis B.

Other viruses can infect many different organs in the body and sometimes the liver. Examples include the Epstein-Barr virus that causes infectious mononucleosis and cytomegalovirus (CMV). CMV only appears to cause significant inflammation of the liver when the infected person is on drugs to prevent rejection of a transplanted organ.

Symptoms

Those in the early phases of the acute infection may experience muscle aches, fatigue, and sometimes joint pains (especially with acute Hepatitis B) that can be troublesome. Sore throat and swelling of the lymph glands are common. Nausea, loss of appetite and occasionally some loose bowel movements may follow these earlier symptoms. While many people will have no symptoms at all, those who are symptomatic may take many weeks to recover.

For those with severe hepatitis, the urine will start to turn dark, the whites of the eyes will start to yellow (this is jaundice). Fatigue tends to lessen once jaundice appears. Jaundice generally lasts one or two weeks. However, in some, particularly those infected with Hepatitis A, jaundice may be more prolonged and associated with severe itching of the skin. This is particularly common in young women taking birth control pills. Birth control pills should be stopped as soon as an individual knows or suspects that they have viral hepatitis.

VIRAL HEPATITIS

Very rarely (less than 1% of) individuals infected with viral hepatitis develop severe, potentially-fatal liver disease. This is called fulminant hepatitis and is generally associated with acute Hepatitis A or acute Hepatitis B infections.

Test and Diagnosis

Health care professionals diagnose viral hepatitis based on symptoms and blood samples which test for liver enzymes, viral antibodies, and viral genetic materials. The blood tests done to measure liver enzymes may not return to normal for up to one year.

Treatment

Acute hepatitis

At the time of initial infection, there is no specific treatment for those with acute hepatitis. Most individuals infected with Hepatitis A, B and E will recover on their own.

Only individuals infected with either Hepatitis B or more commonly C may develop chronic (lasting more than 6 months) hepatitis. Only 1% of adults with acute Hepatitis B develop a chronic infection while 80% those with hepatitis C infection may develop chronic infection. Because of the high likelihood that individuals acutely infected with Hepatitis C will develop chronic hepatitis, immediate treatment is now recommended.

Chronic hepatitis

When Hepatitis B, C or D becomes chronic, it is appropriate to consider treatment from an experienced doctor. In the case of Hepatitis B, two treatments are currently available. Interferon alpha is given by injection and lamivudine comes in tablet form. The actions of these two agents are very different and the form of treatment needs to be tailored to the individual infected.

The standard treatment of Hepatitis C, whether acute or chronic, is with interferon alpha by injection plus ribavirin by mouth. How long these treatments must be taken varies from a minimum of six months to sometimes more than a year. In someone who develops fulminant hepatitis, an immediate liver transplant may be necessary to save his/her life.

Preventing the spread of disease

In persons infected with Hepatitis A, the virus remains present in the stools for up to three weeks after the onset of symptoms. It is extremely important to wash hands carefully after using the toilet and especially before preparing any foods. It is unnecessary for the infected individual to eat separately from the rest of the household or use special plates and cutlery. It is advised that all household contacts undergo a complete course of vaccination against Hepatitis A.

Persons infected with acute Hepatitis B have highly infectious blood and other body fluids including saliva and semen. All precautions to avoid contamination with blood products should be taken. Common forms of blood-to-blood transfer occur during sharing of equipment used to inject illicit drugs, use of improperly sterilized needles/ vaccinations, tattooing, body piercing, sharing of straws to snort cocaine, sharing of razor blades or toothbrushes, transfusion with blood or blood products or organ transplants (prior to 1990). Other more subtle types of blood-to-blood spread can occur between mother and child during childbirth and between small children playing together or scratching each other.

Hepatitis C is not nearly as infectious as Hepatitis B but precautions (listed above) to avoid contamination with blood should be taken. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C infection.

More information

For more information about protecting and enhancing your digestive health, please visit www.CDHF.ca



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the incidence and prevalence of digestive disease

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understanding of digestive health issues

SUPPORT
those suffering from digestive disease

ENHANCE
equality of life for those living with digestive disease

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Canadian Digestive Health Foundation
2511 Scotch Pine Drive, Oakville, ON L6M 4C3
Tel and Fax: 905-829-3949
info@CDHF.ca