

A PROVIDENT HOSPITAL STORY

A nurse's perspective living with Hepatitis C

Question: My brother used drugs for many years. He was recently diagnosed with Hepatitis C infection.

Although he hasn't used drugs for nearly 10 years, his doctors believe his illness is a result of his past abuse of intravenous (IV) drugs.

He has been advised that his condition is chronic and he is in need of a liver transplant. How could this disease cause such serious liver damage without the affected person having any noticeable early warning signs or symptoms?

Answer: Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. It is one of several distinct viral infections of the liver, each caused by a different hepatitis virus. Hepatitis C differs from other types of viral hepatitis in that it has more of a tendency for becoming chronic.

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Generally, the infection is considered chronic if it lasts more than six months.

The Hepatitis C virus infection is currently the most common chronic blood borne disease affecting millions of people worldwide.

Each year in the United States, about 10,000 people die as a result of Hepatitis C related illnesses.

How do you get the virus? The virus for hepatitis C is primarily transmitted or spread by direct exposure to infected blood, such as by receiving a blood transfusion from an infected donor or through use of injection drugs.

Other ways of exposure to the virus, although less likely, include occupational, perinatal (during pregnancy), and sexual contacts.

Who is at greatest risk? Individuals with a history of unlawful intravenous drug use are at greatest risk for getting the virus.

Shared intravenous drug use are at greatest risk for getting the virus. Shared contaminated drug injection apparatus is the most common means of transmission for Hepatitis C today.

However, sharing contaminated straws used for snorting cocaine can also transmit the virus. The chances that an IV drug-user will contract the disease increases with the number of years he has used drugs.

Hepatitis C is a progressive disease, but the rate of progression varies widely from person to person.

During the early or acute stages of infection, the infected person typically is either asymptomatic (that is without symptoms) or has only mild clinical symptoms like fatigue, stomach pain and loss of appetite, occurring about six to eight weeks after the initial infection. Jaundice (yellow skin) is often not seen during the early stages of the disease.

The Hepatitis C virus can lie silent in the body for many years before destroying the liver. During this quiet stage of the disease, the infected person is asymptomatic. About half of all Hepatitis C infected persons suffer chronic liver damage.

Serious liver damage from Hepatitis C may take years; so the younger a person is when infected the higher the likelihood that he'll eventually

develop cirrhosis of the liver leading to liver failure and the need for a liver transplant.

Hepatitis C is the leading cause for liver transplants in the United States. Currently there is no vaccine available for Hepatitis C.

Medical management of the disease consists of the use of antiviral drug therapy. Living with Hepatitis C requires close medical supervision as well as lots of support and encouragement from family and friends. Advise your brother to consider the following measures to prevent spreading the virus and to preserve his own health: Avoid donating blood, organs or semen.

Avoid sharing razors, nail-grooming items, toothbrushes, or other items that could be contaminated with blood.

Cover open wounds and sores. Wash hands thoroughly. Stop high-risk behaviors, e.g., having unprotected sex & drinking alcohol. In someone with Hepatitis C, drinking alcohol dramatically increases the risk of liver cancer.

Do not take any medication, including over the counter drugs without consulting his health care provider. Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A & B, if he hasn't been vaccinated or had the diseases.

Get involved with support groups for Hepatitis. Visit his health care provider regularly, even if he feels well.

Written by Norris Carson-Dunn, RN, MSN, Clinical Educator, Provident Hospital of Cook County

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