

Hepatitis C Fact Sheet ...and HIV Coinfection

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a virus that causes swelling and eventually scarring of the liver, called cirrhosis. This scarring of the liver can reduce the liver's ability to function after long-term HCV infection. This damage develops slowly over many years.

How Can I Get Hepatitis C?

HCV is transmitted when the blood of someone who has HCV directly enters the bloodstream of another individual. Common ways that this can happen include:

- Sharing infected needles (or other equipment);
- Sharing personal items that may have come into contact with blood (e.g., razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, or glucose monitors);
- Unsterilized tattoo or piercing equipment; or
- Unprotected sex with someone who has HCV. Rough sex, sex with multiple partners, or having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV appears to increase a person's risk for hepatitis C.

If you feel you are at risk for HCV, please get tested. Many people who have HCV do not know they carry the virus. There is no vaccine yet for hepatitis C. There are care and treatment options that may be successful in getting rid of the virus, so it is important to talk to your doctor or nurse.

What Does A Positive Hepatitis C Test Mean?

Don't panic! A positive HCV test does not mean that you have active hepatitis. It means that, at some time, you were infected with the virus. You may not be currently infected. The screening test identifies HCV antibodies (Ab) in the serum (blood) -- not the presence of the actual virus. Approximately 20 – 25 percent of those who test positive for HCV antibodies do not have hepatitis or the hepatitis C virus in their blood. In other words, their immune system has eliminated the virus. The PCR viral load test which measures how much virus is in the blood, determines whether there is virus in the body and how much. Talk with your provider about what your test results mean and what course of action you may need to take, in order to stay healthy.

What Does Hepatitis C Cause?

Hepatitis C, in its chronic, or constant form, usually takes between 20 and 30 years to progress to end-stage liver disease (ESLD) when the liver becomes unable to function. Only 20 percent of those infected will progress to ESLD. There is treatment available for HCV, and there are other things you can do to improve your health regardless of treatment:

- Avoiding alcohol and tobacco because they have a toxic effect on the liver;
- Avoiding situations that put you at risk for re-infection, e.g., sharing needles or works, unprotected sex, etc.);
- Consulting health provider before taking any prescription pills or over-the-counter medications, as well as herbal supplements or vitamins, as they can potentially damage the liver; and
- Eating a healthy diet.

Talk to your healthcare provider about other measures they can recommend to stay healthy.

What if I have both Hepatitis C and HIV?

You are not alone! About 25-30% of all people with HIV also have hepatitis C infection in the United States, according to recent Centers for Disease Control statistics. Unfortunately, HIV causes HCV to progress more rapidly in the body, resulting in faster development of cirrhosis and end-stage liver disease (ESLD). For some people, this process could be as fast as 5 years and for others much longer.

Once you have been identified as HCV/HIV co-infected, see your healthcare provider. It is important that you find or get a referral to a provider who has expertise in the evaluation and treatment of both Hepatitis C *and* HIV. This is because treatment of both viruses is different with individuals who are co-infected.

What is the treatment for Hepatitis C?

The current standard of care for hepatitis C consists of treatment with a combination of pegylated interferon, a weekly injection delivered with a small needle just under the skin, and ribavirin tablets, taken twice a day. In contrast to treatment for HIV, HCV treatment has the possibility of eliminating the virus from the body completely. This does not happen in all individuals, though. For some, the HCV viral load (the amount of HCV measured in the blood) may only be reduced and not eliminated, and for others the treatment may not work at all.

The length of treatment and amount of drugs taken depends upon what genotype of the virus is being treated. Genotyping is a way of classifying the Hepatitis C virus and is used in determining treatment. Similar to HIV treatment, it is very important not to miss doses. It is also critically important to finish the course of treatment for best suppression of the virus. Let your provider know if you are having difficulty with the treatment as he/she may offer solutions to your particular problems that will enable you to complete therapy.

Most physicians will want to treat your HIV first, getting your HIV viral load to undetectable and your immune system to the strongest it can be. This can improve the outcome of HCV treatment for some people. Not everyone will start with HIV treatment; it is a personal choice to make with your provider.

Today, there are many new drugs in development that will help people who are not successful in treating their hepatitis C. As these come to market, there will be more treatment options and new ways to treat and clear the hepatitis C virus. With this in mind, try to start treatment with a positive attitude and the mindset that the therapy will work for you. Remember, while HIV cannot be cleared from the body, there is the real possibility that you could clear the Hepatitis C virus.

The latest U.S. Public Health Service/Infectious Diseases Society of America (USPHS/IDSA) guidelines recommend that all HIV-infected persons should be screened for HCV infection. Prevention of HCV infection for those not already infected and reducing chronic liver disease in those who are infected are important concerns for HIV-infected individuals and their health care providers.

Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The U.S. Public Health Service/Infectious Diseases Society of America (USPHS/IDSA) guidelines

Internet Resources

1. CDC HIV/AIDS Home Page: www.cdc.gov/hiv
2. Division of Viral Hepatitis, CDC: www.cdc.gov/hepatitis
3. National Institutes of Health: <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/chronichepc>
4. CDC National Prevention Information Network: www.cdcnpin.org
5. Hepatitis C Task Force for Los Angeles County: www.hepctaskforce.org

-For the most up-to-date Hepatitis resources visit www.hivla.org

If delivery of Hep C services has not been offered appropriately, please contact OAPP's warmline @ (800) 260-8787.