What isHepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a chronic liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV causes inflammation of the liver and can eventually lead to liver damage. Currently, there is no vaccination available to prevent HCV infection, but antiviral therapy is available to help clear the virus from the blood.[1]

How can you get Hepatitis C?

HCV is spread from person to person through infected blood. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada 70 to 80% of new infections are due to injection drug use (sharing needles and other drug-using equipment) and the most common risk factors for HCV infection include:

- Tattooing, body piercing when unsterile equipment or techniques are used.
- Needle prick injuries with contaminated equipment in the workplace.
- Exposure during medical or dental procedures that involve the use of contaminated equipment.
- Sharing personal care items with an infected person (razors, toothbrush, etc.).
- Unprotected sexual activity that includes contact with blood or an exchange of blood with an infected person.
- Being born to a mother with HCV.

Hepatitis C can be detected in the blood. If you think you are at risk for infection, speak to your health care provider who may suggest a blood test.

How to avoid Hepatitis C infection

According to Health Canada, Infection can be avoided by taking the following precautions:

- Not sharing needles or drug use equipment.
- Wearing latex gloves when coming into contact with another persons blood.
- Safer sex practices that include the use of condoms and avoiding blood to blood contact.
- Ensuring sterile equipment is used during tattooing or body piercing.
- Being tested for HCV before becoming pregnant.

What effect does Hepatitis C have on your health?

HCV affects your liver, a vital organ that plays a main role in filtering the chemicals and toxins and has an important role in digestion. Unfortunately, most infected people do not have symptoms or are unaware of their symptoms which can include feeling tired, decreased appetite, sore muscles, abdominal pain and yellowing of the skin and eyes[2]. If left untreated for a long period of time, HCV can lead to cirrhosis or cancer.

Hepatitis C infection and First Nations, Inuit and Métis

HCV infection rates are disproportionately higher in First Nations and Inuit populations in Canada. Results from the Enhanced Hepatitis Strain Surveillance System (EHSSS) between 2004 and 2008 indicate the overall incidence rate for Aboriginal persons was 5.5 times higher than in non-Aboriginal persons[3].

Hepatitis C and HIV coinfection

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is also spread person to person by infected blood and shares the same risk factors for infection as HCV. It is estimated that approximately 25% of people infected with HIV are also infected with HCV[4]. Research has indicated that the majority of coinfected people are injection drug users.

1. Public Health Agency of Canada. (2009). In Get the Facts. Retrieved February 4, 2010 from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hepc/pubs/getfacts-informezvous/index-eng.php

2. Health Canada. (2009). Hepatitis C. In It's Your Health. Retrieved February 4, 2010 from http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/hepc-eng.php.

3. GY Minuk, J Uhanova. Viral hepatitis in the Canadian Inuit and First Nations populations. Can J Gastroenterol 2003; 17(12):707-712.

4. L Moore. (2005). Treatment and Prevention Update HIV and Hepatitis C: Enhancing Care of the Coinfected Patient. Ontario Medical Association. Retrieved on February 4, 2010 from http://www.oma.org/pcomm/omr/jun/07hiv.asp

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