Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by one of many hepatitis viruses. In British Columbia, the most common types are hepatitis A, B and C. Hepatitis C is the most common form of viral hepatitis infection reported in BC.

Some people clear the hepatitis C virus from their body, meaning it goes away on its own. Most people (75 to 85% of the time) will not clear the virus and hepatitis C can become a long term or chronic condition. Treatment for HCV is becoming more widely available and more successful.

Causes

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is spread through blood-to-blood contact. It is most often passed by:

- Sharing injection equipment, such as needles, syringes and pipes
- Sharing drug snorting equipment
- Accidentally getting poked with a needle that has been used by a person who has hepatitis C
- Blood or blood product transfusions in a country where the blood supply is not tested for hepatitis C. In Canada, this applies only to transfusions before 1990. As of June 1990, all blood and blood products in Canada have been screened for HCV.

Other ways that hepatitis C can be spread include:

- Sharing toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, nail files, or other items that have blood on them
- Tattoos, body-piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis if the equipment is not sterile
- Unprotected sexual intercourse, especially when a person has a sexually transmitted infection or is HIV positive

Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food or drinks. It is also not spread by insect bites or swimming in a treated pool when you have cuts, scrapes or are menstruating.

Currently there is no data to suggest that HCV is passed in human breast milk. Breastfeeding is encouraged, except when the nipples are cracked or bleeding.

Symptoms

The first six months after exposure to hepatitis C is called the acute stage. Many people will have no or very few symptoms during the acute phase, but over time they may start to notice:

- Fever
- Feeling tired
- Muscle pain
• Jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes)
• Depression
• Anxiety
• Abdominal pain
• Dark urine
• Loss of appetite and nausea

Complications

After a long period of time, some people with HCV may develop cirrhosis, liver cancer or may need a liver transplant.

Tests and Diagnosis

Finding out if you have hepatitis C involves two blood tests:

• An HCV antibody test
• A PCR test is done when the antibody test is positive, to see if the virus has been cleared

Most test results are accurate 10 weeks after contact with hepatitis C.

Treatment

People with hepatitis C should see their health professional every 6 to 12 months. Even if people with HCV feel well and have no symptoms, the virus can still be damaging the liver.

Treatment for hepatitis C can cure about 70% of those treated. In rare cases, people who have liver damage may need a liver transplant.

If you have hepatitis C, you may want more information or to talk to others who also have the infection. The Pacific Hepatitis C Network can connect you with resources and local support groups in your area.

Prevention

Currently there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

People who have hepatitis C should be vaccinated against hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and pneumococcal disease. If you have hepatitis C, you can get these vaccines for free from your local health unit or family doctor.
Resources

BC Centre for Disease Control – http://www.bccdc.ca/dis-cond/a-z/_h/HepatitisC/default.htm
HealthLink BC – http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile40a.stm
HealthLink BC – Living well with Hepatitis C http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile40b.stm
Pacific Hepatitis C Network – http://www.pacifichepc.org/