



HEPATITIS C

By: Director of Gastroenterology Department



Introduction

It is one of the viruses that causes inflammation of the liver and is rampant in our population. It can remain silent for long and may not show any signs or symptoms, hence the importance of screening of high risk populations. Chronic infection can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver failure, and liver cancer. There has been a great advancement in the treatment of hepatitis C as previously it was treated with injections that carried a list of adverse effects. In contrary, now we have safe and effective oral medicines that can cure the infection.

Symptoms

Like hepatitis B, it can be silent without any symptoms. The symptoms usually occur in chronically infected patients where the liver has been silently damaged by the virus. They include:



Fatigue



Yellow discoloration
of the eyes and skin
(jaundice)



Nausea



Low grade fever



Joint pain



Upper abdominal
discomfort



Drowsiness
especially in cases
with persistent
(chronic) liver
disease, a sign of
worsening disease.



Fluid in the abdomen
especially in cases
with persistent
(chronic) liver
disease, also a sign
of worsening disease
etc.

Risk Factors



Needle stick injuries



Injectable drug abuse



HIV



Body piercing



Long term
hemodialysis



Sexual transmission
may occur but the
risk is low



Transmission from
mother to child



Blood transfusions
due to improper
screening of blood

Prevention

No vaccine is available for prevention of hepatitis C hence the best way to prevent hepatitis c is to avoid the risk factors responsible for the spread of the infection. Education for the patients and general public regarding the risk factors and prevention practices such as personnel shaving kits, safe and proper injection use, avoiding injectable drug abuse, proper handling and discard of the sharps, is an important tool to break the cycle of transmission. Getting tested for hepatitis C in the presence of risk factors and early treatment can prevent long term and serious complications.

Diagnosis

A specific set of blood test is needed for diagnosis of Hepatitis C. Further test may be needed to assess the extent of liver damage. These include ultrasound abdomen and other tests as recommended by the doctor.

Treatment

Effective and safe oral drugs are available that can completely eradicate Hepatitis C virus. These drugs are usually once a day pill taken for 3-6 months. Every positive case requires treatment. People with chronic liver damage due to Hepatitis C are managed with medications and may require liver transplant and need to follow up regularly with their doctor.

There is no vaccination for Hepatitis C however you should get yourself vaccinated for Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B viruses.