What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood borne virus that can cause long term inflammation of the liver. Approximately 240,000 Australians are living with the hepatitis C virus which is slow acting and for most people will not result in serious disease or death. A number of people may not experience symptoms whilst others will experience symptoms ranging from mild to severe. Many of these symptoms appear to be related to the immune system responding to the virus.

The hepatitis C virus is transmitted by blood. Hepatitis C positive blood must get into your bloodstream before transmission can occur. Groups of people who have been most at risk of contracting hepatitis C in Australia are injecting drug users, male haemophiliacs who had blood product transfusions before 1990 and prisoners due to the high prevalence of injecting drug use.

Transmission

Common ways that Australians have been infected with Hepatitis C include:

- the sharing of injecting drug equipment
- recipients of blood transfusions or blood products prior to 1990 (highest in multiple transfused)
- tattoos, body piercing and skin penetration (when non sterile equipment has been used)
- a number of Australians contracted hepatitis C in other countries probably via non-sterile medical or dental injections or other procedures

Hepatitis C positive and protective sex (using condoms, dams and/or gloves) should be practiced during menstruation.

The risk of mother to baby transmission of hepatitis C is approximately 5%. Women with hepatitis C are encouraged to have natural births and to breastfeed unless nipples are cracked and bleeding.

Hepatitis C is totally different to HIV and AIDS and one of these viruses cannot lead to the other.

Effects

Hepatitis C involves an initial (acute) phase of infection which often goes unnoticed and lasts about 2-6 months. Approximately 5-10% of people experience symptoms during this period. During this phase the levels of the virus rise dramatically until the body’s immune response starts producing antibodies.

Based on the analysis of current literature on the progression of hepatitis C, it appears that 65-85% of people with Hep C infection will progress to chronic or long term infection.

Among people with chronic infection, 5-10% will progress to cirrhosis by 20 years of infection, and possibly 20% by 40 years of infection. Progression to cirrhosis is more likely in people with heavy alcohol intake, co infection with HIV and
chronic Hepatitis B infection, and those with already severe fibrosis on liver biopsy.

**Antibody Tests**

A hepatitis C positive antibody test result can leave many people feeling very distressed, anxious and depressed. Accessing accurate information and support at this point is very important and can help people cope through this difficult period.

A Hep C anti-body positive test result means that at some stage of your life you have been infected with the Hepatitis C virus. A liver function test is usually done to help determine if you have the virus. If your liver enzymes are elevated (particularly your ALT’s) then there is a strong chance that you still have the virus. If you have had a Hep C positive antibody test and had normal liver function results for two consecutive tests six months apart you are eligible to have a Medicare covered PCR test. A qualitative PCR test will indicate if the virus is present or not (contact the Hepatitis C Council of SA Inc for specific details on all aspects of testing).

**Symptoms**

During the initial (acute) phase a small number of people may experience flu-like symptoms. Some people may develop nausea, abdominal pain, back pain and extreme tiredness. Most people do not experience any symptoms for the first ten years or more after their initial infection. Symptoms of chronic infection can range from mild to severe. These symptoms can occur continuously or in bouts.

The most common symptoms of chronic hepatitis C infection are:

- fatigue or tiredness/lethargy
- nausea and discomfort in abdominal region
- feeling ill after drinking alcohol or eating fatty food
- depression

Symptoms associated with cirrhosis appear to vary from mild to severe and are essentially similar to those of chronic hepatitis C. Whilst many people with cirrhosis may experience no symptoms, others may experience profound lethargy and significant discomfort in the liver region. Cirrhosis is a serious and complex condition requiring specialised medical support.

Many people have found that some symptoms can be alleviated by reducing or stopping alcohol consumption, reducing fat in their diet and by using a variety of complementary therapies such as Chinese herbs, acupuncture and vitamin/herbal supplements such as St Mary’s Thistle (Silymarin) and dandelion root.

Information from the Hepatitis C Council website accessed 1st April 2009. [except for diagram]