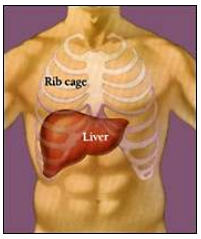
OOSH BULLETIN

Hepatitis C: A Bloodborne Pathogen

September, 2008



What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis means an inflammation of the liver. The liver is an important organ that detoxifies and purifies the blood. Hepatitis C is a viral infection that causes damage to the liver. It is caused by HCV, the Hepatitis C virus. The dangerous thing about Hepatitis C is that it may live in the body for years, even decades, before it is discovered or before the damage is detected. At present time, there is no vaccine for HCV available.

There are five types of Hepatitis. For the most part they all have the same effect--they damage the liver. The different types of hepatitis are caused by different viruses and are transmitted in different ways.

Types of Hepatitis	Viral Agent	Route of Transmission
Hepatitis A	HAV	Oral-Fecal/ Food borne
Hepatitis B	HBV	Bloodborne
*Used to be called viral hepatitis		
Hepatitis C	HCV	Bloodborne
*Used to be called non A/non B Hepatitis		
Hepatitis D	HDV	Bloodborne
Hepatitis E	HEV	Oral-Fecal/ Food borne

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of Hepatitis C may vary from very slight to severe. Symptoms may occur from two weeks to six months after exposure, but usually within two months. In the early stages, most people do not show any symptoms. These individuals are called asymptomatic. Some experience mild symptoms that may include:

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Diminished appetite
- Muscle and joint pains
- Abdominal pains
- Jaundice (the yellowing of the skin)

If a person has Hepatitis C, even if he or she does not show any symptoms, he or she is still able to transmit Hepatitis C to others. Some will recover and most will become chronic carriers and develop cirrhosis of the liver.

How is Hepatitis C transmitted?

Hepatitis C is a bloodborne pathogen. This means that one may not contract Hepatitis C by casual contact such as shaking hands, sharing a glass or utensils, coughing or sneezing. Bloodborne pathogens are disease causing microorganisms that are transmitted through blood or other potentially infectious body fluids. Hepatitis C may be contracted by coming in contact with contaminated blood or other body fluids. Such body fluids may include:

- Blood
- Saliva with blood (dental procedure)
- Semen
- Vaginal secretions

Most often infections occur when an individual comes in contact with possible infectious body fluids and may include:

- Blood Transfusions -- Before 1992, people who received blood transfusions may have been at greater risk of being infected with Hepatitis C, as the screening techniques were not as thorough as they are today.

- Intravenous Drug use—using needles or inhaling cocaine through contaminated paraphernalia is also a means of transmission.
- Tattooing/Manicures – there is a very low risk but, some cases have been reported where the equipment i.e., razor was not properly sanitized between each use.
- Sexual contact -- coming in contact with contaminated semen and vaginal secretions poses a low but real risk as well.

According to the Mayo Clinic, 15% to 20% of those infected with Hepatitis C are able to fight off the virus on their own and do not suffer liver damage. For the other 80% to 85%, the disease takes up residence in the body and slowly attacks the liver.

Health experts predict that Hepatitis C will continue to cause more and more deaths. According to the American Liver Foundation, nearly 1 in 50 Americans has been infected with HCV. At this time there is no vaccine and no cure for Hepatitis C. However, there are treatments, but most importantly, there is prevention.

How does an employee protect oneself?

Practice Universal Precautions. Universal Precautions is a practice in which all blood and body fluids are treated as though they are contaminated. Latex gloves or other protective barriers must be used when handling blood or other potentially infectious body fluids.

If an employee thinks that he or she may have been exposed to Hepatitis C due to an occupational exposure, the employee should:

- Report the incident to a supervisor or Site Administrator;
- File an Exposure Incident Report;
- Seek medical attention and get tested immediately. A simple blood test can now be used to diagnose Hepatitis C.

What is the treatment of HCV?

Currently, there is no specific treatment or medication that can be used to cure acute form of HCV. The Food and Drug Administration has approved interferon and ribavarin to treat those who are chronically infected with the virus. A licensed Health Care Professional would determine the proper combination on how best to treat his/her patient. People who are infected with HVC should not drink alcohol. They should also speak with their doctor prior to take any new medication or non-prescribe medication and vaccination for the Hepatitis B and/or Hepatitis A vaccines.

Getting more information

More information about the program that the Department of Education has in place may be obtained by reviewing the Bloodborne Pathogens Exposure Control Plan. This Plan may be found in the main office of each school or be obtained from the Site Administrator or the Principal.

Other sources of information:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (www.cdc.gov)
- National Institutes of Health (NIH)
- New York State Department of Health
- New York City Department of Health

NYC Department of Education

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