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## **Hepatitis C**

### **What is Hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis refers to inflammation of the liver. This can occur from trauma, lack of blood flow to the liver, blockage of drainage from the liver, drug or alcohol abuse, or infections. Hepatitis C is such an infection-causing virus that attacks the liver and then causes hepatitis. Most often this results in a chronic infection.

### **Symptoms and Diagnosis**

Hepatitis C may not have any symptoms. Though rare, acute infection can cause loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, fever, muscle aches, jaundice, darkening of the urine, and abdominal pain. Or patients with chronic infection and progression of the disease may exhibit fluid retention, confusion, jaundice, muscle wasting, and bleeding problems.

Diagnosis of Hepatitis C is determined by liver tests which can show elevated abnormal enzymes. There are also other markers that indicate liver infection in the blood. Use of physical exam can demonstrate yellow skin or easy bruising. An ultrasound or CT scan may show signs of cirrhosis if the patient has a chronic infection. A liver biopsy can be considered if the diagnosis is in doubt, or to assess the degree of liver damage.

### **Prevention & Treatment**

Acute infection can be treated with supportive care, but a patient may need to be hospitalized if it is severe. More commonly, the infection is chronic, and select patients can be treated with antiviral medications. Such are helpful in decreasing inflammation in the liver and reducing likelihood of progression to cirrhosis. This treatment usually requires 6-12 months. Depending on the type of Hepatitis C, the virus can be cleared in approximately 60-80% of patients. However, liver transplant can be considered in select patients who do develop cirrhosis from Hepatitis C.

Some groups are at higher risk for contracting Hepatitis C including intravenous drug users, those with tattoos or piercings, people who have received blood transfusions outside the U.S. (or in the U.S. prior to 1991), people with multiple sexual partners, healthcare workers, dialysis patients, and prisoners. Prevention may include avoiding excess alcohol or medications that are harmful to the liver, vaccination for Hepatitis A and B (if not already immune), and regular blood tests to monitor liver function.