

# To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*

Bringing you public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health



## **Hepatitis C, A Slow, Silent Killer**

June 17, 2016

An estimated 3.5 million persons in the United States are living with an infection that causes approximately 20,000 deaths each year, and more than half of those infected are unaware of it.

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver and is the most common cause of chronic liver disease and cirrhosis; a major cause of liver cancer; and the most common indication for liver transplant in this country. This illness is transmitted by exposure to blood containing the hepatitis C virus (HCV) and is the most common blood-borne infection nationally.

Twenty to thirty percent of individuals exposed to the virus may develop symptoms of liver inflammation within 2 weeks to 6 months of exposure. Symptoms of acute hepatitis C include: fever, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and jaundice. While acute infection can be severe, it rarely results in fulminant liver failure.

Whether or not infection with hepatitis C virus causes symptoms of acute infection, 75 to 85% of infected individuals fail to clear the virus from their bodies. This leads to a chronic infection and inflammation which results in severe liver disease over the ensuing years to decades. Symptoms of chronic hepatitis C usually do not appear until the liver is badly damaged, and can include ascites (significant accumulation of fluid in the abdominal cavity), upper gastrointestinal bleeding, hepatorenal syndrome (a form of kidney failure), and hepatic encephalopathy (characterized by personality changes, intellectual impairment, and a depressed level of consciousness.)

In 1 to 2% of individuals with chronic hepatitis C there are associated manifestations beyond the liver that involve multiple organ systems. Further, chronic infection with HCV increases the risk of certain other cancers in addition to cancer of the liver.

The rate of progression to severe liver damage is quite variable and depends upon a number of factors such as: alcohol consumption, age at the time of initial infection, and concurrent infection with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and/or hepatitis B.

Because the hepatitis C virus mutates easily and has over 50 subtypes, a vaccine has yet to be developed. However, new antiviral medications make a cure possible, especially for certain genotypes of the virus.

Before widespread screening for HCV in the blood supply began in 1992, hepatitis C was often spread through blood transfusion and organ transplant. Today, current or former IV (intravenous) drug users and people who received a blood transfusion before 1992 are at greatest risk for the infection. Exposure can also occur through improper tattoo and body piercing procedures. Much less commonly HCV is transmitted through lapses in infection control at health care facilities, sharing personal items such as razors and toothbrushes, and through sexual intercourse.

Because HCV is quite infectious with exposure to infected blood, because the majority of those infected do not develop symptoms initially, and because symptoms of advancing liver disease are not evident until significant damage is done, it is critical that certain individuals be tested for HCV infection. You should discuss testing with your health care provider if you:

- Were born between 1945 and 1965
- Received donated blood or organs before 1992
- Received clotting factor concentrates before 1987
- Have **ever** injected drugs
- Have certain medical conditions, such as chronic liver disease or HIV/AIDS
- Have abnormal liver tests
- Have been exposed to blood from a person known to have hepatitis C
- Are, or have been, on long-term hemodialysis
- Were born to a mother with hepatitis C
- Have a sex partner with hepatitis C or have many sex partners
- Have ever been incarcerated

In addition to testing, and knowing your HCV status, there are other steps you can take to protect yourself. You should:

- Avoid sharing or reusing needles, syringes or any other equipment used to prepare or inject drugs, steroids, or other substances. [Needle exchange programs](#) exist in the community and physicians and pharmacists are now permitted to furnish or sell [syringes](#) without a prescription to adults 18 years or older for disease prevention purposes
- Seek assistance and treatment for any drug addiction
- Use condoms correctly every time you have sex if you are a man having sex with men or if you have multiple sex partners
- Use proper procedure and personal protective equipment when performing any medical procedures within health care facilities involving possible contact with blood or blood products
- Not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood (even in very minute amounts) such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, or blood lancets
- Not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting

Because HCV and HIV are both transmitted through blood exposure these infections are commonly found together in individuals. About one third of all Americans infected with HIV also have Hepatitis C. This co-infection rate is even higher in individuals with HIV infection and that use injection drugs.

Having HIV infection in addition to HCV infection increases hepatitis C disease progression, triples the risk for liver damage, increases transmission of HCV through sexual activity, and increases the chance of transmission of HCV from a mother to her newborn infant.

If you are living with chronic hepatitis C you can improve your wellness and chances for cure by:

- Learning all you can about the treatment of hepatitis C and actively engaging with your health care provider in that treatment (programs exist which offer [financial assistance](#) with treatment)
- Adequately managing any other medical conditions (especially HIV infection)
- Eating healthfully
- Exercising moderately on a regular basis
- Getting adequate sleep
- Avoiding alcohol consumption
- Being aware of medications and supplements that stress the liver

Don't let this silent killer strike you down! Know when to test, know how to prevent, and know how to treat.

Here's to your health!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Bird".

Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Health Officer  
[ToYourHealth@co.fresno.ca.us](mailto:ToYourHealth@co.fresno.ca.us)