Hepatitis C

What is it?

Hepatitis C is a virus that causes infection of the liver.

How serious is Hepatitis C?

There are an estimated 3.5 million chronically infected persons in the U.S. 75-85% of people who get hepatic C will become chronic carriers (chronic infection). About 10-20% of persons with chronic hepatitis C will develop serious liver problems 20 to 30 years after becoming infected. 80% of persons with chronic hepatitis C appear to suffer only mild injury to their liver over time and have minimal or no symptoms of illness.

Symptoms

- Symptoms usually begin 6 weeks to 6 months after exposure to the virus (average 2 to 4 months).
- Symptoms can include nausea (upset stomach), loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, loss of energy, fever and abdominal cramps (stomach or side pain).
- Dark yellow or brown urine, pale or white-colored stool (bowel movements), and jaundice (yellow eyes or skin).
- Less than 30% of persons with a new infection get any symptoms at all and less than 20% get jaundice.
- Persons can have all or only a few of these symptoms.

How is it spread?

- The virus is primarily spread through direct contact with blood, such as sharing injection drug equipment and punctures with sharp instruments.
- Hepatitis C can be spread through sexual contact but this is uncommon.
- Hepatitis C can be spread from a mother to her baby at the time of delivery but this is uncommon (only 5 out of 100 babies born to women with hepatitis C will become infected).
- Hepatitis C used to be spread through blood products prior to 1992 but this almost never occurs today.
- People can spread hepatitis C to others even if they don't have any symptoms.
- Hepatitis B is not spread by kissing, hugging, sneezing, or by saliva.

Diagnosis and treatment

- Hepatitis C is diagnosed with a series of
- The screening test is a blood test called the ELISA or EIA antibody test. If the screening test is positive, a confirmatory antibody test called RIBA antibody test or a test for the virus (HCVRNA) should be done.
- There is no medicine or treatment that will make the symptoms go away faster or prevent chronic infection.
- There are treatments for persons with chronic hepatitis C but not everyone needs them.
- The most common treatment includes both interferon (a shot) and ribavirin (a pill).
- Rest, a low fat diet, and plenty for fluids are recommended. Avoid drugs and alcohol during any acute (new) illness.

Prevention

- There is no medicine or treatment that can prevent illness after an exposure to hepatitis C.
- There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.
- If you use injection drugs, you should try to get into treatment to stop drug use. If you cannot, do not share needles, drugs, mixing solution, or works.
- Practice safe sex if you have more than 1 sexual partner. (use condoms for any sexual activity, including oral, anal, and vaginal sex).
- Do not share personal hygiene items that might get contaminated with blood, such as razors, nail clippers, or toothbrushes.
- Cover all cuts and open sores with a bandage.
- If you have hepatitis C, do not donate blood, plasma, organs or semen.
Who should be tested for Hepatitis C?

- You ever used injection drugs, even one time.
- You received a blood or blood products or an organ donation prior to 1992.
- You were notified that you received blood or blood products from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C.
- You received a blood product for clotting problems prior to 1987.
- You are a health care or public safety worker, who has been exposed to blood from a person with hepatitis C, including an injury with a needle or sharp instrument.
- Your mother had hepatitis C when you were born.
- You have ever been on long-term kidney dialysis.

If I have Hepatitis C, what do I need to do?

- **Avoid drinking alcohol.**
- Talk with your health care provider before taking any new medications, herbal remedies, or over the counter medications (including acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and aspirin).
- Get immunized against hepatitis A and B (if you have not already had these infections).
- See a health care provider regularly who can monitor your liver function.
- Protect yourself. If you use injection drugs, you can get reinfected with a different type of hepatitis C or other diseases spread through blood contact such as HIV and hepatitis B. Do not share or reuse any injection equipment.

Report all cases to El Paso Department of Public Health by calling 915-212-6520