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A WORD FROM BEST DOCTORS

There are a few different types of hepatitis, and while some symptoms may differ, in all cases hepatitis damages the liver, the largest gland in the human body. Some types of hepatitis can heal on their own with no major consequences, but in other cases, it can lead to severe damage and scarring of the liver, and even death. In fact, viral hepatitis is one of the leading causes of death globally.¹

There are five main types of hepatitis, but hepatitis A, B and C are the most common, responsible for about 90 per cent of acute hepatitis cases in Canada.² Vaccines exist for hepatitis A and B, but there's no vaccine available for hepatitis C, which often goes undetected for a long time due to an absence of early symptoms. In many cases, once it is detected, it is because it has caused enough damage to produce symptoms. However, there are steps that can be taken to prevent the different types of hepatitis.

Although reported rates of hepatitis B and C have been declining in Canada, there is still much progress to be made when it comes to promoting greater awareness of the disease and its risks, enhancing education efforts when it comes to early identification and prevention, and providing greater access to affordable treatment.

Hepatitis comes under the spotlight on July 28, which has been designated World Hepatitis Day, one of only four disease-specific global awareness days officially endorsed by the World Health Organization.

WHAT IS HEPATITIS?

The five main types of hepatitis – A, B, C, D and E – are transmitted differently. A lab test is used to determine the type of hepatitis a person is infected with.

- Hepatitis A occurs when contaminated food or water is consumed. This type of hepatitis does not lead to chronic disease, and most of those infected go on to make a full recovery.
- Hepatitis B is spread via contact with infected blood or other bodily fluids. It can also be transmitted by a syringe used by an infected person or by sharing personal items such as a toothbrush or razor. Hepatitis B can cause serious liver damage, which can result in cancer. In some patients, the disease becomes chronic (i.e. very long-term or lifelong).
- Hepatitis C is usually spread through direct contact with the blood of an infected person. The risk of liver cancer increases in people suffering from cirrhosis—20 per cent of hepatitis C patients get cirrhosis.
- A person can only become infected with hepatitis D if they are already infected with hepatitis B. Infection occurs through unprotected sex, contact with infected blood and the use of infected needles.
- A person can become infected with hepatitis E by drinking contaminated water. Infection can also occur through sexual contact.

DIAGNOSING HEPATITIS: A SILENT, BUT PREVENTABLE, DISEASE

In the early stages, many people with hepatitis either experience mild symptoms or none at all. An absence of symptoms means people infected with hepatitis often aren't aware they have the disease. In fact, 90 per cent of people living with hepatitis B and 80 per cent of those living with hepatitis C are unaware of their status.³ This means there's a greater risk of a person developing fatal liver disease or unknowingly transmitting the infection to others.

Symptoms

In the initial phase of hepatitis, also called the acute phase, symptoms resemble a mild flu and may include:

- Diarrhea or mild fever
- Fatigue

- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting

This early phase usually isn't dangerous unless it develops into the rapidly progressing form of hepatitis, which can lead to death.

As the disease progresses, the symptoms change and may include:

- Dark urine
- Dizziness or drowsiness
- Hives, itchy skin or yellow skin, whites of eyes and tongue (jaundice)

Prevention

The good news about hepatitis is that it's a disease that can largely be prevented by following the right steps. Here's how to prevent different types of hepatitis:

Hepatitis A:

- Regular hand washing
- Caution with food and water consumption (ensuring food is cooked and drinking boiled/ bottled water if unsure of local sanitary conditions)
- Getting the hepatitis A vaccine

Hepatitis B:

- Practicing safe sex
- Not sharing razors or manicure instruments
- Ensuring well-sterilized equipment is used for acupuncture or tattoos
- Getting the hepatitis B vaccine

Hepatitis C:

- Not sharing razors or manicure equipment
- Ensuring well-sterilized equipment is used for acupuncture or tattoos
- Limiting alcohol consumption



THE HIGH COST OF CURING HEPATITIS C

The good news: powerful drugs have the potential to cure chronic hepatitis C for some patients. The bad news: the cost of those drugs is prohibitively expensive, and only patients that meet certain criteria are eligible for financial assistance from the government. For example, one drug that has the ability to rid the body of all six strains of hepatitis C when taken daily for 12 weeks carries a price tag of \$60,000 for a full course of treatment—that's more than \$700 per pill.

While eligibility requirements vary by province, in general, provincial governments cover the cost of hepatitis C drugs for residents who meet certain criteria, with the provinces providing assistance for low-income residents or those receiving social assistance. In Ontario, for example, coverage for hepatitis C medication is provided to specific groups such as Ontarians 65 years of age or older, people receiving social assistance and residents of long-term care facilities. Each province has its own criteria when it comes to coverage, so if you or a loved one has been diagnosed with hepatitis C, be sure to find out about treatment coverage in your region.

TREATING HEPATITIS

With hepatitis A, the body is often able to clear the infection by itself in a few weeks. While a full recovery is expected with nearly all hepatitis A infections, there are cases where hepatitis A can cause further complications.

Acute hepatitis B is generally not treated with medication as the disease can resolve on its own. However, chronic hepatitis B is treated with antiviral drugs that slow the replication of the virus, and can sometimes result in it being cleared.

Treatment for chronic hepatitis C involves the use of drugs, and in some cases, a combination of drugs is administered. Some hepatitis C sufferers respond more successfully to treatment than others. In some cases, treatment isn't required as the immune response will clear the infection.



Over 40 per cent of the estimated 220,000 Canadians with hepatitis C don't know they are infected.⁵



Viral hepatitis accounts for 1.34 million deaths per year around the globe—comparable to the number of deaths caused by HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis or malaria.¹



Together, hepatitis B and C are responsible for approximately 80 per cent of all liver cancer deaths.³



In Canada, liver failure related to hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver transplants.⁴

LIVING WITH HEPATITIS: DOS AND DON'TS

If you've been diagnosed with hepatitis, it's important to take proper care of yourself for your own health and the health of others. It's also up to you to take the right steps to prevent the spread of the hepatitis virus. This means frequent hand washing, taking care to properly dispose of items that have blood (e.g. bandages), covering open sores and cuts and informing sexual partners of your health status.

It's also critical to monitor the state of your liver at least once a year to determine if the disease is progressing and if cirrhosis or liver cancer is developing. If you're living with hepatitis, you should avoid or severely restrict alcohol and be sure not to share items such as razors, toothbrushes, manicure tools or anything that might have even a tiny amount of blood on it.

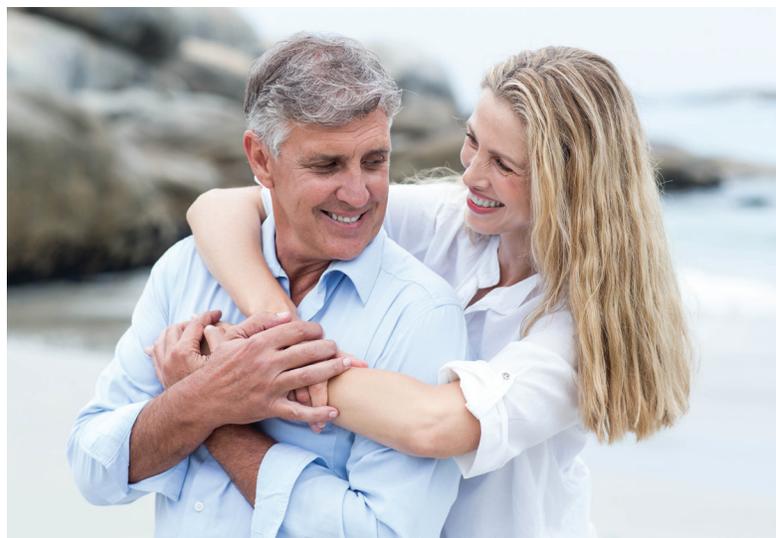
Coping with a hepatitis diagnosis

Although a hepatitis diagnosis isn't a death sentence, it can certainly add a lot of stress to a person's life. There are both emotional and physical symptoms to deal with, including fatigue and nausea. While having a support network of friends and family is important, reaching out to a local support group may be helpful too.

HOW BEST DOCTORS CAN HELP

Given the high rates of undiagnosed hepatitis cases in Canada, getting a diagnosis is critical if you suspect you or a loved one may be infected. If you've been diagnosed and aren't sure what to do, Best Doctors can help in

several ways. With any serious diagnosis, a second opinion is crucial, and Best Doctors can ensure you have been correctly diagnosed and are getting the right treatment, as well as assist you in finding a specialist (such as a hepatologist), while taking into account your geographic location. If you need additional resources, we can also help you find a local support group, information about hepatitis and answer any questions you have.



Sources

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