Hepatitis

Hepatitis is an infection of the liver. It makes it hard for your body to absorb HIV meds. This can hurt your treatment and cause more side effects.

Hepatitis from a virus can be acute or chronic. Acute means that you would get sick for a few weeks. Then you get better. Chronic means that your liver is infected for six months or more. Chronic hepatitis stays in your body and can make you sick over and over. You can also infect others with your blood and body fluids.

Hepatitis can damage the liver if not treated. In time this leads to scars on your liver, liver failure or liver cancer.

Signs

There are seven types of viral hepatitis. The most common are hepatitis A, B and C.

Hep A does not last long and does not lead to chronic liver problems. Hep B and C can become chronic.

The signs for all three include:

- Dark urine or clay-colored stool
- Feel very tired
- Itchy skin
- Not hungry
- Low grade fever
- Sick to your stomach and throwing up
- Stomach pain and feeling bloated
- Weight loss
- Yellow skin or eyes

Many people with hepatitis think they just have the flu.

Causes

Hepatitis can be due to:

- Infections. More than 90% of all hepatitis is due to a Hep A, B or C virus. Other rare viruses can cause problems as well.
- Prescribed Meds. Some meds your doctor prescribes. People on these meds are given liver tests and watched closely.
- Street Drugs and Alcohol. Damage from alcohol, drugs or toxic mushrooms
- Aspirin. Too much Tylenol® (acetaminophen). This is rare but deadly.
- Immunity. The immune system attacks the liver

You need to tell your doctor all the types of meds that you take.

Risk Factors

A person is more likely to get hepatitis if he or she:

- Is a heavy drinker or uses IV drugs
- Eats unwashed foods
- Had a blood transfusion before 1990
- Has a family member with Hep A
- Has a tattoo
- Has contact with blood in their work
- Has HIV or AIDS
- Has unsafe sex with many partners
- Is born to a mother with Hep B or C
- Lives in a special care home
- Takes too much acetaminophen. It is easy to get an overdose because many other drugs are mixed with it.
- Travels where hepatitis is common

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How to Know You Have Hepatitis

A blood test is needed to see if you have a virus or other infection. A sample of the liver may be taken to get a closer look.

Sometimes an ultrasound of the stomach is done. If the liver is swollen, fluid may be taken from it to check for infection.

Treatment

You need to treat hepatitis to prevent further health problems. Most people with Hep C get chronic liver disease, liver failure or liver cancer.

Hepatitis may make your throat bleed or cause a stomach infection.

There are no cures for Hep A and E. The good news is that they only last a couple weeks. Treatment for Hep C has many side effects and can last up to 1 year.

Your doctor can prescribe meds to treat Hep B and D. Some HIV meds work well against Hep B.

In order for these drugs to do their job, the liver needs to work. Things that bother the liver (such as alcohol, aspirin, street drugs and some herbs) should be stopped.

Drugs that did not cause a problem when a person was healthy can be harmful with hepatitis.

People with hepatitis should tell their doctors and pharmacists all the medicines, supplements and herbs they take. This helps avoid side effects and stress on the liver.

It may also be helpful to:

- Avoid heavy meals late at night. Try to eat most of your meals early.
- Get enough rest and sleep.

Prevention

The best way to prevent hepatitis is to have good health habits.

- Always wash your hands after you use the bathroom and before you handle food.
- Eat only well-cooked food and drink bottled water when you travel.
- Avoid close contact with people (or their blood) that have hepatitis. Condoms can help stop the spread of Hep B and Hep C.
- Do not share razors, needles or your toothbrush with people.
- Be careful when you get pierced or tattooed.
- Vaccines can protect you from Hep A and B, even after you are exposed.
- If you kissed or ate with a person with Hep A in the last two weeks, get a shot of immunoglobulin. This can also help protect an infant born to a woman with Hep B.
- Get tested if you have had sex or shared needles with someone who may have hepatitis.

For more information
Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call PHP Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

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