

## Louisiana Pharmacists Association Educates Patients about Hepatitis C Virus

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were 30,500 reported cases of acute hepatitis C infections in the United States in 2014. It is estimated that 2.7 – 3.9 million people are currently living with chronic hepatitis C infection in the United States. Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver, which can be caused by a variety of factors such as viral and bacterial infections, diseases, and toxins. In hepatitis C infected patients, the liver inflammation is caused by the hepatitis C virus.

Hepatitis C virus is contagious and is spread through the blood of an infected individual. Sharing injection drug needles, needle-stick injuries in the healthcare setting, being born to a mother with hepatitis C virus, and use of un-sterilized medical equipment or needles are all possible ways to become infected with the virus. Although there is low risk of passing on the infection, hepatitis C may be transmitted through sexual encounters and sharing personal hygiene items that come into contact with blood such as a razor. The infection is not spread through breastfeeding, mosquitoes and other insects, food, water, hugging, kissing, or sharing food and drinks with an infected person.

The virus may cause acute, short-term illness or long-term chronic illness. Acute hepatitis C infections occur within 6 months of exposure to the virus, and it is estimated that 15 – 45% of patients with acute hepatitis C virus are able to clear the infection on their own. However, most patients will not clear the infection, and instead will progress to chronic hepatitis C infection.

The vast majority of patients with acute hepatitis C infection do not experience any symptoms. However, some patients may experience symptoms such as dark urine, clay-colored stool, joint pain, yellowing of skin or eyes, fatigue, fever, nausea, and vomiting. People with chronic infection may also be asymptomatic, but the consequences can potentially be serious. Chronic hepatitis C infection can lead to liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, and even death. The CDC reported chronic hepatitis C infection to be the leading cause of liver cancer and cirrhosis in the United States, with nearly 19,000 people dying every year.

Fortunately, newer antiviral medications such as sofosbuvir, elbasvir, and ombitasvir are being used to achieve a 95% cure rate in patients with hepatitis C. These new medications have less side effects and are safer to use than previous drug regimens, although they are more expensive.

Although there are vaccines for hepatitis A and hepatitis B infections, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection. The best way to prevent hepatitis C infection is to reduce risk of exposure by safely using medical equipment and needles, safely disposing sharps (needles, syringes, and injection devices) in the healthcare setting, not sharing needles for injection, receiving tattoos or body piercings at regulated parlors, and proper use of condoms.

The World Health Organization recommends all individuals born between the years of 1945 to 1965 to get screened for hepatitis C infection as well as high risk individuals. Those at high risk for hepatitis C infection include: current and previous injection drug users, HIV-infected patients, hemodialysis patients, recipients of donated blood and blood products, recipients of donated organs, people who received body piercings or tattoos with un-sterile equipment, and children born to mothers infected with hepatitis C virus. Patients at risk should discuss hepatitis C infection and screening tests

with their doctor. Screening, early diagnosis, and treatment in infected patients can prevent consequences of hepatitis C virus and even cure the disease.

References:

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/cfaq.htm>

<http://hepc.liverfoundation.org/treatment/the-basics-about-hepatitis-c-treatment/>

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs164/en/>

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