How Hepatitis C Can Lead to Liver Cancer

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Hepatitis C and Liver Cancer: What You Need to Know

If you've recently been diagnosed with hepatitis C, you've probably got lots of questions and concerns. Perhaps you're wondering — how is this treated? How did I get it? Can I give it to my family?

You may not realize — unless your doctor has already told you — that hepatitis C can lead to liver cancer.

The Facts

According to the American Cancer Society, having a chronic hepatitis virus (hepatitis C or hepatitis B) is the most common risk factor for liver cancer. Chronic hepatitis may lead to cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, which can ultimately lead to liver cancer — in fact, in areas of the world where hepatitis is very common, liver cancer is often the most common type of cancer.

That being said, three million Americans have hepatitis C. Less than five percent of those people will go on to develop liver cancer.

However, your risk does increase if you also have cirrhosis, which occurs in about 20 percent of people with hepatitis C.

How Does Hepatitis C Lead to Liver Cancer?

Hepatitis C is a chronic condition; it is incurable and the person with it will have it for the duration of their life, unless a cure is found.

Cirrhosis occurs because the healthy cells in the liver are gradually replaced with scarring. As this is going on, the liver creates more cells in an attempt to heal itself, furthering the scarring.

This process increases the chances of developing liver cancer because of the proliferation of cells — if a mutation occurs, this can cause liver cancer.

Ingesting alcohol can speed up the process of damaging the liver, leading to cirrhosis. Without any extra 'help,' cirrhosis can take up to 20 years to occur.

Certain medications are also known to cause liver damage, such as naproxen, ibuprofen and acetaminophen.

What Are the Symptoms of Liver Cancer?

If you have hepatitis C, you should be aware of the symptoms of liver cancer; this will enable you to recognize the possibility of cancer and allow you to receive prompt treatment.

Symptoms include:

- Pain in the upper right side of the abdomen, radiating to the back and shoulder
- Fatigue and weakness
- Bloating with a feeling of fullness
- Nausea with a loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Fever
- Yellowing of the skin and the eyes (jaundice)

Seek medical attention immediately if you have any of the above symptoms.

What Is the Prognosis for Liver Cancer?

A liver transplant is an option for a small percentage of people. This option will cure liver cancer, provided it has not metastasized to other areas of the body.

A surgical resection is also an option; this is effective in one out of three cases. Scientists are also working on treatments that will prolong the lives of people with liver cancer.

How to Prevent Liver Cancer

The best way to prevent liver cancer secondary to hepatitis C is the prevention of hepatitis C.

This may mean quitting injecting drugs, ensuring that needles are clean prior to getting a tattoo or a piercing, and using protection prior to sexual activity. In addition, for the healthcare worker, using safe needle practices is important.

However, if you already have hepatitis C, staying as healthy as possible while living with hepatitis C may help. According to the National Cancer Institute, there are risk factors for cancer that can be avoided — such as smoking.

In addition, protective factors that can reduce the risk of cancer include exercise and a healthy diet. Losing weight if overweight may also be helpful.

Remember, just because you have hepatitis C does not mean that you have a one-way ticket to getting liver cancer. Focus on taking care of your hepatitis and your health in general and you may be able to decrease your risk.