Hepatitis: Lessons for Latinos

Hepatitis viruses and the liver diseases they cause affect millions of people in the United States every year, with a disproportionate number of Latinos falling ill. Among all ethnic groups, Latinos have some of the highest risks of contracting, being diagnosed with, or dying from hepatitis A and B viruses (two of the viruses that most often cause hepatitis). Learn how you can protect yourself and your family with this basic hepatitis 101 lesson. For full lessons, including extended and updated news about prevention, treatment and medications, check out HepMag.com.

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What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is a general term that describes inflammation of the liver. Inflammation can be blamed on several culprits including toxins and chemicals (like excessive amounts of alcohol), autoimmune diseases, microorganisms and viruses. Five viruses are known to cause inflammation: hepatitis A, B and C viruses (HAV, HBV, HCV), delta hepatitis virus (HDV) and hepatitis E virus (HEV). HBV and HCV viruses can cause fibrosis (hardened fibers in the liver) and cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), which can decrease the liver's ability to function and can ultimately cause liver failure and cancer. These two viruses are also the leading causes of liver cancer.

What do I need to know about hepatitis A virus?

Among all ethnic groups, Latinos had the second highest incidence of hepatitis A and were twice as likely to be diagnosed with hepatitis A than non-Latino whites. HAV is spread from one person to another when the feces (even tiny amounts) of someone with HAV gets into another person's mouth. This can happen by eating or drinking contaminated food or water, and by engaging in oral-anal sex.

The best way to prevent HAV is simply to get vaccinated. More than 99 percent of people who get the vaccines develop immunity and will never get the virus, even if exposed to it. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), some people should be routinely vaccinated, including people living or working in countries with intermediate to high exposure of HAV (such as Mexico and countries in Central or South America). For a full list of people who should be vaccinated, click here.

If you haven't been vaccinated, you can still protect yourself by avoiding contaminated water or foods, washing your hands after using the bathroom and before preparing or eating food, and by using a latex barrier for oral-anal sex. If you think you've been exposed to the virus, talk to your doctor about receiving meds to help prevent hepatitis from setting in. Treatment for HAV usually involves getting bed rest, drinking plenty of fluids and taking over-the-counter pain relievers.

Eventually, the virus goes away on its own.

What do I need to know about hepatitis B virus?
HBV is most commonly spread through the exchange of blood, semen or vaginal fluids through sexual activity or through sharing injection drug equipment. While the vast majority of adults who are infected with HBV clear the virus on their own, approximately 5 percent of people go on to experience chornic infection, which can eventually cause liver failure or liver cancer.

Again, the best way to prevent HBV is to get vaccinated. The vaccines, which involve three injections given over a six-month period, are effective for more than 90 percent of adults and children who complete the entire process and are also available in HAV combinations. Since Latinos older than 40 are 30 percent more likely to develop hepatitis B, it is important for those in this age group to look into their options.

Vaccines are recommended for all people who have not been vaccinated (or infected) previously, sex partners or household contacts of people who have HBV, men who have sex with men, injection drug users and people living with HIV. For a full list of people who should be vaccinated, click here.

If you haven't been vaccinated, you can still protect yourself by always using a condom or latex barrier while having sex, using new needles if you're an injection drug user, and not sharing items that may have been contaminated with someone else's blood (like toothbrushes, razors or needles). If you think you were recently exposed to HBV, talk to your doctor about receiving medications to contain the virus.

There is no cure for HBV, only treatment. Treatment is only recommended for people with chronic HBV virus. Treatment options vary depending on age, overall health, results of clinical tests, and readiness to take meds as prescribed. To see a list of options you can discuss with your doctor, click here.

What do I need to know about hepatitis C virus?
HCV is most easily spread through direct blood-to-blood contact; the virus passes from the blood of an infected person to an uninfected person. Though many people living with HCV today were infected decades ago via blood and blood-product transfusions, people are still being infected today, mostly via shared needles and other equipment used to inject drugs. It is generally believed that HCV cannot be transmitted through semen or genital fluid unless blood is present.

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine to prevent HCV. But you can take steps to protect yourself. First and foremost, stopping or not injecting drugs. If you do continue to inject, then use new, sterile syringes every time (cleaning needles with bleach is not enough) and never share equipment. You should also not share toothbrushes, razors or needles with someone infected with HCV. And while it's uncommon to transmit HCV through sexual activity, it is still advised to use condoms.

If you do have HCV, you have several treatment options. How you are treated and how long your

treatment program lasts depend on your HCV genotype (the genetic structure of the virus) and what happens during your initial months of therapy. For a full list of treatment options, click here.

If you have questions or concerns, want extended hepatitis lessons and fact sheets, information on medications and trials, or just want to learn more, check out HepMag.com. Information on how to protect yourself and your family is just a click away.

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