

# America's Silent Epidemic

Members of Congress have joined forces with the Surgeon General of the United States, David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., to issue a national warning letter alerting all citizens to Hepatitis C—the life threatening liver disease caused by the Hepatitis C virus. This insidious virus, commonly referred to as HCV, has reached epidemic proportions infecting 4 million Americans—half of whom are completely unaware of its presence.

Helping to carry the mantra in the Midwest is **Charles J. Sigmund Jr., M.D.**, of St. Louis Gastroenterology Consultants, who calls the asymptomatic virus a “time bomb.” We don’t know if

individuals are going to have a mild form of the disease or if it will turn into chronic hepatitis, so it is very important that people take action and educate themselves and their families.”

You should consider getting tested for Hepatitis C if:

- you’ve received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant before July, 1992;
- received a blood product for clotting problems produced before 1987;
- ever injected illegal drugs, even if you experimented a few times many years ago;

- had your ears or any other part of your body pierced;
- have a tattoo; or either
- a hands-on health care job or had been exposed to blood in the military.

The hepatitis C virus possesses the extraordinary ability to change, or mutate, its protein coating so often that the body’s infection-fighting immune system simply can’t keep up with it.

Many patients with hepatitis C lurking within their bodies don’t discover they’re infected until it is too late. This is largely due to the fact that hepatitis C most often presents with little to no symptoms. A

whopping 80 to 85 percent of newly diagnosed hepatitis C patients develop chronic liver infections, which may lead to cirrhosis or liver cancer. “This irreversible liver damage leads to more liver transplants. Unfortunately, the new liver is almost always infected, since they’re still carrying the virus,” relates Dr. Sigmund.

There is hope. Treatments are available. Almost half of patients treated today achieve a sustained response. Up until last year, interferon alone was used to fight the virus. A synthetic form of a substance the body naturally produces to fight infections and strengthen the immune system, interferon is usually injected three times a week for at least six months, and often a year. Recently, an FDA approved anti-viral medication called ribavirin has been added to the arsenal. This medication seems to do little on its own, but when used with interferon, ribavirin helps to eradicate the hepatitis C virus and normalize liver enzyme levels.

Clinical trials are underway for another promising new therapy that entails attaching a chemical to interferon to keep interferon in the body longer. “By keeping this substance—known as pegylated interferon—in the body longer and at a constant level, it continues working on the virus,” explains Dr. Sigmund. “It may prove to be more effective than current interferons alone. Higher response rates when combined with ribavirin are also anticipated. Instead of giving shots three times a week, we can do it once.”

If you think that you are at risk for hepatitis C, see your doctor. A simple hepatitis C antibody test, which is relatively inexpensive, can be run with your regular blood work to determine if you have been exposed.

In addition to the hepatitis viruses, St. Louis Gastroenterology Consultants also diagnose and treat colon cancer, ulcers, tumors of the stomach and esophagus, upper abdominal pain or indigestion, intestinal bleeding and heartburn.

For information or referrals: (314) 842-5700. ■

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*Dr. Charles Sigmund believes educating the St. Louis community about Hepatitis C is important.*