

PRESS RELEASE



Strict Embargo: 00.01hrs
Thursday **28 July, 2010**

4,000 PEOPLE IN ENGLAND MAY NEED LIVER TRANSPLANTS BY 2020 DUE TO HEPATITIS C, HPA WARNS

It is estimated that around 216,000 individuals in the UK are living with chronic hepatitis C, many of whom are unaware of it. Those individuals who have not yet been diagnosed and treated are at risk of developing serious liver disease. Latest Health Protection Agency (HPA) figures have estimated that around 4,200 people in England would need a liver transplant as a result of hepatitis C by 2020 if action is not taken.

It is therefore critical that anyone who suspects they could have been exposed to Hepatitis C (for example by using unsterile or sharing injecting equipment) is tested.

The future burden of hepatitis C-related infections is set out in 'Hepatitis C in the UK', a report produced by the HPA to coincide with World Hepatitis Day on 28 July.

Dr Helen Harris, a hepatitis expert at the HPA said: "Many people are unaware that they are infected with the virus because they have no symptoms at all. If people think they have been exposed to the virus, it is vital that they contact their GP for a test. The earlier they are diagnosed the better, as they will have a greater chance of successfully treating their infection.

"There is currently no vaccine to protect against hepatitis C but simple measures such as using sterile injecting equipment and not sharing personal items like toothbrushes and razors will minimise your chances of being exposed to the virus."

Over 15,000 people in England are expected to be living with cirrhosis or liver cancer caused by hepatitis C in 2020, unless they are diagnosed and treated. The most seriously affected will require liver transplants. Treatments are already available that will successfully clear the virus in more than half of those infected but unless a major increase in those diagnosed and receiving effective treatment occurs, the future burden of hepatitis C-related disease on the NHS is likely to be substantial.

In 2010, 7,834 new diagnoses of hepatitis C were reported to the HPA in England.

Injecting drugs with unsterile injecting equipment, particularly needles and syringes, can put an individual at risk of infection, even if they injected only once or twice in the past. Others at risk of infection include those who have received blood transfusions before September 1991 or blood products before 1986 in the UK. People who originate from countries where hepatitis C is endemic, like South Asia, are also at risk. In these countries infection often arises following medical or dental treatment with unsterile equipment.

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Dr Harris added: “Our report sets out a number of public health recommendations to help reduce the future burden of hepatitis C on the NHS. Public health providers need to work with the local NHS and other statutory bodies to sustain and enhance prevention services that minimise ongoing transmission of hepatitis C. These groups in turn will need to work collaboratively with the voluntary sector to support campaigns to raise awareness and increase levels of diagnosis. Healthcare providers should also continue to develop integrated pathways of care that improve access to treatment, particularly for those groups that are hard to reach.”

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. The full report is available from the press office under embargo.
2. More information on hepatitis C can be found on the following pages of the HPA’s website: <http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/HepatitisC/> or the hepatitis C pages of the NHS Choices website <http://www.nhs.uk/hepatitisc/Pages/default.aspx>
3. For more information about World Hepatitis Day, visit (site of the World Hepatitis Alliance) <http://www.worldhepatitisalliance.org/default.aspx>
4. The Hepatitis Trust is a charity which provides information and support on hepatitis C. <http://www.heptrust.org.uk>. More information from the British Liver Trust is available at <http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/home.aspx>
5. Hepatitis is the swelling or inflammation of the liver. The most common causes of hepatitis are viral infections, such as hepatitis C. Some of the other main causes of the liver disease include alcohol and obesity.
6. Those most at risk of acquiring infection are injecting drug users. Half of the injecting drug users in England (49 per cent) have tested positive for the HCV antibody. Estimates in England suggest that 44 per cent of Hepatitis C infections are in current injecting drug users and a further 43 per cent of infections are in those who no longer inject drugs but did so in the past. Less common ways to become infected with hepatitis C include:
 - from infected mother to baby before or during birth
 - having medical and dental treatment abroad, where unsterile equipment may have been used
 - tattooing or body piercing where unsterile equipment may have been used
 - sharing razors or toothbrushes that may have been contaminated with blood from someone who is infected
 - unsafe sex
7. The World Health Organization estimates that 170 million people worldwide are infected with hepatitis C. More people are affected worldwide by hepatitis than HIV (which affects an estimated 33 million people worldwide) but in many cases the infection goes undiagnosed and untreated.
8. Initiatives to help fight the infection have included the 'Get tested. Get treated' campaign which was launched to target former injecting drug users together with a campaign targeting the South Asian community, who are at increased risk of infection and who may have acquired their infections via other routes. Other work on a national level to tackle hepatitis C and other causes of liver disease has included creating the new position of National Clinical Director, who will lead on the development of a national liver strategy.

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9. For more information please contact the national HPA press office at Colindale on 0208 327 7901 or email colindale-pressoffice@hpa.org.uk. Out of hours the duty press officer can be contacted on 0208 200 4400.