



HEPATITIS C LESSONS • PART 2

Monitoring and Watching Hepatitis C

PURPOSE

To help the people in your group better understand how the hepatitis C virus is affecting their health. By knowing what's happening to their bodies, they can work better with their healthcare providers—whether they decide to take medicine for the virus or not.

FACTS TO HELP REDUCE FUTURE DAMAGE

It's a good idea to talk with the group about certain lifestyle changes that could help reduce additional liver damage.

Lifestyle and dietary changes:

- *Stay away from drugs and alcohol*
- *Eat right (more fruits, vegetables, and fiber; less fatty, fried, sugary or junk foods)*
- *Exercise regularly. Talk to your healthcare provider before starting any exercise program*
- *Stop smoking*

IMPORTANT NOTE!

Be on the lookout for signs that something isn't right. If you have hepatitis C and notice changes, tell your healthcare provider if:

- *You feel differently than you usually do*
- *You are more tired than usual*
- *Your eyes or skin tone look different*
- *If you feel sad a lot*

DISCUSSION TOPICS

What are facts to help reduce future damage?

What tests will your healthcare provider order?

What are liver enzymes and viral loads?

What is a liver biopsy?

How fast does the virus grow?

What are fibrosis and cirrhosis?

Handout: Monitoring and watching hepatitis C

What is a liver biopsy?

Today, a liver biopsy is still the most common way to determine if someone with hepatitis C has liver damage.

During a liver biopsy, a healthcare provider puts a needle into your liver and takes out a small sample of liver tissue to examine.

After the biopsy, the liver tissue will be sent to a lab. There, it will be looked at through a microscope, and the results will be put into a report about the health of your liver. Remember to ask when your results will be back from the lab. It can take several days to 2 weeks.

Some healthcare providers are starting to try new ways to get the same information without having to do a biopsy. Some of these tests measure blood chemicals, others take pictures—such as CT scans, X-rays, and ultrasounds—to check on liver disease.

There is a test called a Fibroscan—a machine that sends radio waves through liver to measure the health of the liver. Some medical providers are using this test along with certain liver enzyme tests to replace the liver biopsy.

For now, though, the liver biopsy is still the most common test.

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What are fibrosis and cirrhosis?

The presence of hepatitis C in the liver causes inflammation (swelling). Over time, this constant swelling causes a buildup of dead cells in the liver that hardens and thickens the liver (scarring). This scarring is called fibrosis.

The way to measure fibrosis is by having a liver biopsy or a Fibroscan. There are several systems for rating how much fibrosis there is in the liver. Different labs use different measurements. But for all of the rating systems, the higher the number, the worse the damage:

- **Stage 0:** *No scarring*
- **Stage 1:** *A small amount of scarring*
- **Stage 2:** *A little more scarring*
- **Stage 3:** *A lot of scarring*

- **Stage 4:** *A large part of the liver is scarred (Cirrhosis)*

If you have a liver biopsy or a Fibroscan, ask your healthcare provider what stage of fibrosis your liver has.

The worst stage is cirrhosis. It causes the liver to shrink and harden. Cirrhosis can slow blood flow to the liver, which can cause the liver to stop working.

There is no way of knowing exactly who is going to get cirrhosis. It does not happen right away. In fact, some people who have cirrhosis for a long period may not show any signs of it. But people with hepatitis C need to talk to their healthcare provider about cirrhosis because it can do serious damage, and the virus can start damaging the liver without any symptoms.

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Cirrhosis

There are 2 different stages of cirrhosis:

- Compensated cirrhosis *means that the liver has a large amount of scarring (dead tissue), but can still function. People with compensated cirrhosis may show few signs of the disease. In fact, a person may live many years with cirrhosis without being aware that his or her liver is scarred*
 - Decompensated cirrhosis *means that the liver has a lot of scarring (dead tissue), which keeps the blood it needs from flowing through it. As a result, the liver is unable to work like it's supposed to. Compensated cirrhosis can become decompensated in a short period of time, so it is important to monitor the liver carefully*
- *Too much fluid in the abdomen, or belly (ascites)*
 - *Bleeding (internal bleeding, such as bleeding in the esophagus, or food pipe)*
 - *Vomiting*
 - *Dark urine (pee) or not being able to urinate at all*
 - *A yellow coloring in the skin and eyes (jaundice)*
 - *Feeling confused*
 - *Dark, tarry bowel movements*
 - *Easy bruising of the skin*
 - *High blood pressure in branches of the blood vein called the portal vein, which brings blood from the intestine to the liver (portal hypertension). Cirrhosis is the leading cause of portal hypertension in Western countries*

You can see the signs of decompensated cirrhosis. Some of these symptoms may include:

Another serious complication of cirrhosis is liver cancer.

What is Fatty Liver?

Fatty liver (also called *fatty liver disease* or *steatosis*) is when there is too much fat in the liver cells. It is the most common type of liver disease in the United States.

Drinking too much alcohol is one cause of fatty liver. But it can also happen to people who hardly ever drink. People have a greater chance of getting fatty liver if they:

- *Are overweight*
- *Have too much fat (cholesterol) in their diet*
- *Don't exercise enough*

The amount of fat in the liver might go down when overweight people lose weight, when a diabetic's blood sugar is under control, or when levels of cholesterol are lowered.

- *Have diabetes*

People with hepatitis C are more likely to have fatty liver than those without hepatitis C. That's why it's so important to follow a healthy diet.

NOTES

Review Points

1. It is important to have your hepatitis C monitored.
2. Work closely with your healthcare provider.
3. Do what is necessary to avoid more damage to your liver. This includes:
 - *Stop drinking alcohol and taking drugs*
 - *If you can't do it on your own, ask your healthcare provider or a counselor for help)*
 - *Eat right (more fruits, vegetables, and fiber; less sugar and fatty, fried, or junk foods)*
 - *Exercise regularly. Talk to your healthcare provider before starting any exercise program*
 - *Stop Smoking*

Suggested Reading:

An Overview of HCV Diagnostic Tests

www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/diagnostic.pdf