

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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OCTOBER IS NATIONAL LIVER AWARENESS MONTH

How many of us realize that the liver is the largest organ *inside* the body? It also has several different tasks to complete to keep us healthy, including storing vitamins, sugars, fats, and other nutrients from food we eat, removing waste products from the blood, breaking down harmful substances (like alcohol and poisonous chemicals), building chemicals needed for a healthy body, and maintaining a balance of all the chemicals the body needs. With so many jobs to do, it is no wonder there are over 100 forms of liver disease. Over 25 million Americans suffer from some type of liver disease, incurring costs in the billions of dollars. Liver diseases affect men, women, and children of all races and ages; over 15,000 children alone are hospitalized with liver disease each year in this country.

Some of the more familiar liver diseases are liver cancer, cirrhosis, and viral hepatitis. Liver cancer, as in other forms of cancer, occurs when some of the cells in the liver reproduce faster than they should and form tumors. This can be a fatal disease.

Cirrhosis literally means, "scarring of the liver." This scarring is the result of damage or injury to the liver, often caused by drinking too much alcohol. Once the scarring occurs, the liver may not be able to carry out one or more of its usual functions as it should, leading to a number of related health problems.

Cirrhosis may also occur following a hepatitis infection, especially Hepatitis C. Further, both Hepatitis B and C can increase the likelihood of developing liver cancer. Hepatitis is a viral infection that means "swelling of the liver." Three of the most common viruses that affect the liver are Hepatitis A, B, and C.

Hepatitis A is usually contracted through food or drinking water that is contaminated with fecal matter. Infected people have higher concentrations of virus in fecal material than in saliva or other bodily fluids. The infection attacks the liver, which secretes the virus into the bile and the digestive tract. While a person may be infected with hepatitis A and not have any symptoms, the usual signs of hepatitis A include flu-like symptoms, nausea, fatigue, vomiting, pain in the area of the liver, dark urine, fever, and a yellowish color in the skin or the whites of the eyes. Most people recover fully from Hepatitis A without additional problems, but rarely, those who are alcoholic, have chronic cirrhosis, or are over age 60 may suffer liver failure. About 100 Americans die each year from hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B is a virus that is usually spread through the blood and other bodily fluids. It is normally contracted through sexual activity or sharing needles used to inject drugs. However, it is also possible to contract hepatitis B through close contact, and cases have been reported to occur from tattooing, body piercings, and even sharing a razor or a toothbrush. Although most people recover from hepatitis B, about 2-6% of the cases involve complications, some of which result in permanent liver damage. After recovering from a hepatitis B infection, individuals acquire lifetime immunity to the disease. However, about 10% of those who have recovered from this illness retain the virus in their bodies, and they can become chronic carriers of the hepatitis B virus having no symptoms of the disease themselves. There are about 80,000 new cases of hepatitis B in this country every year. In the United States, all infants are given

the hepatitis B vaccine, and many older children (11-12 years) receive the vaccine as well. It is also recommended that adults in high risk situations also be vaccinated; these include health care workers, intimate contacts and household members of people diagnosed with hepatitis B, dialysis patients, IV drug users, people who require frequent transfusions, and gay males or people with multiple sexual partners.

Like hepatitis B, hepatitis C is primarily spread through the blood. While those with the other hepatitis infections become ill from the virus, people with hepatitis C make not feel ill at all. However, hepatitis C is a serious illness that can cause permanent liver problems, including cirrhosis and cancer.

Since the liver is such an important organ, measures can and should be taken to keep it healthy:

- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B. (There is no vaccine for hepatitis C yet.)
- Practice safe sex.
- Do not share personal items that may have blood on them.
- Do not inject illegal drugs.
- Abstain from drinking alcohol.

To learn more about liver diseases, contact the American Liver Foundation at 800 465-4837(www.liverfoundation.org), or visit www.medicinenet.com. For additional information about this or other health topics, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2824 (www.ccthd.org).