HEPATITIS C

Hepatitis C is a viral infection that inflames and damages the liver. It progresses slowly, and the infected person might not notice symptoms. The infection can go undetected for years.

Hepatitis C might be short-term or long-term. Short-term (or “acute”) infection might clear up within six months, but about 70 percent of those with hepatitis C suffer long-term (chronic) infection.

The disease can cause cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer and liver failure. Hepatitis C affects nearly 3.2 million people in the United States, and about 150 million people are chronically infected worldwide.

CAUSES
Hepatitis C is transferred through contact with the blood of an infected person. Typically this contact occurs through:

- Sharing needles while using drugs. Use of injected drugs accounts for about 60 percent of new hepatitis C cases each year.
- Tattoo needles or piercing, when the instruments have not been sterilized.
- Men having unprotected anal sex.
- Using an infected person’s toothbrush, razor or nail clippers.

People at greater-than-average risk of getting the disease include healthcare workers, babies born to infected women and hemodialysis patients.

SYMPTOMS
Many people who are infected do not have symptoms until complications develop. When symptoms do show up, they tend to be mild and flu-like, including nausea, joint pain, sore muscles, fatigue, loss of appetite, fever, headaches, and abdominal pain. The infected person also might have dark urine or jaundice.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT
Since a person who has hepatitis C might not have symptoms, screening is important. Doctors diagnose the disease through blood testing, physical examination for signs of liver damage, and asking about the patient’s risk factors.

Medications called direct-acting antivirals have proven effective in curing hepatitis C. Other medication, surgery or liver transplant might be necessary if the disease has caused cirrhosis or liver cancer.

MORE INFORMATION
The UK Digestive Health Program offers comprehensive care for those with hepatitis C. ukhealthcare.uky.edu/digestive/hepc 859-257-1000 or 800-333-8874

Hepatitis Foundation International www.hepfi.org/HEPATITIS/Hepatitis-C 800-891-0707

American Liver Foundation www.hepc.liverfoundation.org 212-668-1000