

Most effective hepatitis C treatment fails in majority of Hispanics, study shows

January 15 2009, By Bob LaMendola

The most effective treatment for hepatitis C fails in two-thirds of Hispanic patients but works for half of white patients, researchers reported Wednesday in a study that confirms ethnic disparities in the liver disease.

The study follows earlier research showing that the drug combination used to treat the hepatitis C virus also fails for almost three-quarters of black patients. Doctors said unknown biological differences may diminish the success of the drugs in minority patients.

"There may be factors in individuals, in their immune response, that may be related to their ethnicity," said Dr. Paul Martin, senior author of the study and chief of liver diseases at the University of Miami medical school.

Doctors and hepatitis advocates said patients should not give up on the drugs. The combination - pegylated interferon plus ribavirin - is a step up from a decade ago, when drugs worked in only 10 percent. New and better drugs are in the works.

Hepatitis C is a leading cause of liver cancer and cirrhosis, and fueled a jump in liver transplants. The virus spreads in blood, mainly via injection drug use and transfusions before 1992.

About 4 million nationally have chronic hepatitis C. A blood test can detect the virus, and the drug combination can eradicate it - when it

works.

The new study in the New England Journal of Medicine gave the drugs to 269 Hispanic patients and 300 white patients for a year. They were deemed a success if they were virus-free six months after that.

The drugs worked for 49 percent of white patients but only 34 percent of Hispanic patients. The Hispanics never got rid of the virus, or it returned.

"It's probably genetic or biology," said Dr. Lennox Jeffers, chief of liver disease at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Miami, who worked on this study and two with black patients.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read the study:

content.nejm.org/

For more information:

www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/

or call 800-232-4636.

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