Lupus Patients Have Higher Rates of Hepatitis C, Study Finds

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Lupus patients appear to have higher-than-normal rates of hepatitis C virus (HCV), according to a new study published in the journal Immunologic Research. The findings support previous research linking the liver disease to autoimmune issues, which is emerging as a new body of study around HCV treatment and care, Lupus News Today reports.

Lupus is a chronic inflammatory disorder that occurs when the body's immune system attacks its own tissues. Symptoms of lupus include severe fatigue, joint pain or swelling, headaches, a rash on the cheeks or nose, hair loss and anemia. Other lupus symptoms depend on the part of the body the disease is attacking, such as the digestive tract, the heart or the skin. The most common form of lupus is called systemic lupus erythematosus, or SLE, which was the focus of this latest report.

For the study, researchers looked into the medical database of Clait Health Services in Israel and compared the medical records of 5,018 people diagnosed with SLE to 25,090 age- and sex-matched controls. Ultimately, they found that the rate of HCV infection among people with SLE was nearly three times higher than in the control group—with a prevalence of 1.06 percent versus 0.39 percent.

Results also showed that lupus patients between 40 and 59 years old were the most likely to be infected with the liver virus and that the association was more likely to occur in older men. Interestingly, a significant association was also observed among patients of higher socioeconomic status.

Infection with the hepatitis C virus is known to trigger autoimmune issues in a minority of patients, a condition known as autoimmune hepatitis, or AIH. Study authors noted that previous studies using much smaller patient cohorts had also found a higher rate of hepatitis C among lupus patients, but this is the first time a significant association has been made with such a large national database.

It is estimated that at least 1.5 million Americans are living with lupus. Unlike hepatitis C, there is no cure for lupus. However, treatment can help ease symptoms in some people.

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