

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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UT Southwestern researchers test new drug to fight growing hepatitis C virus

DALLAS – Oct. 26, 2005 – Researchers at UT Southwestern Medical Center are investigating a new drug for hepatitis C – a protease inhibitor aimed at keeping the virus from replicating.

The new drug blocks a viral enzyme known as a protease, which hepatitis C needs to replicate, and represents a new target and a new strategy for treating the disease, which can be fatal.

Protease inhibitors have stirred excitement in successfully treating HIV patients, but efforts to develop a successful inhibitor for hepatitis C have only recently shown promise.

“I think this could be quite an important breakthrough; however, this is an early phase clinical study, and it is too early to know how important this drug may be,” said Dr. William Lee, director of the Clinical Center for Liver Disease at UT Southwestern and professor of internal medicine.

Hepatitis C, a liver disease causing inflammation, is one of five types of hepatitis virus, typed A through E. Symptoms of hepatitis C, the leading cause of cirrhosis and liver cancer leading to transplants, are uncommon until advanced liver disease has developed. About 4 million Americans are infected with it.

Unlike the better known hepatitis A and B, no vaccine is available for hepatitis C. The current standard treatment is a combination of weekly interferon shots and ribavirin pills that work together to boost the immune system to attack the virus. But this regimen is only effective in about half the cases treated.

The new drug, in the form of a pill, is taken in conjunction with the interferon and ribavirin. The study will compare the medications to the treatment supplemented by the protease inhibitor. Only patients who have failed on standard interferon and ribavirin will be eligible for the new study.

“Most people are asymptomatic, they really don’t know they have it,” Dr. Lee said. “They discover it if they try to give blood or try to get insurance or an annual checkup.”

Hepatitis C was spread by blood transfusions prior to blood-bank screening, which began in 1991. The most common risk factor now is intravenous drug use. The disease can be dormant for long periods and show up decades later.

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“Even if people just casually used illicit drugs three times when they were 17 and now they’re 45, they can have it. That’s kind of a classic story for us actually,” said Dr. Lee.

UT Southwestern has several other ongoing studies for hepatitis C and B. In one study for previously untreated patients, a comparison of two different brands of interferon with ribavirin is under way with drug and patient visits provided at no cost to the patient. Interested persons should call 214-648-3240 for more information on the studies.

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