Frequently Asked Questions

A Primer for GPs: Hemochromatosis

As presented at the University of Alberta

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1. What is hemochromatosis?

Hemochromatosis is a disorder of excessive iron stores.

2. How do you get hemochromatosis?

Hemochromatosis is acquired either by genetic means (mutations in the HFE gene), or environmental means (individuals with chronic anemia who require frequent transfusions).

3. Who is most at risk?

- First degree relatives of those diagnosed with HFE hemochromatosis.
- Individuals with unexplained abnormalities suggestive of end stage organ damage from excessive iron stores, especially liver function abnormalities.
- It is controversial whether individuals of Northern European heritage should be screened in middle age in the same way that one screens for hypertension, diabetes and hyperlipidemia.

4. How do I screen for the illness?

The best objective laboratory screen is the per cent transferrin saturation. Saturation of more than 60 % in males and 50% in females is suspicious for hemochromatosis. An elevated ferritin in the setting of elevated per cent transferrin saturation adds further suspicion.

For an in-depth article on hemochromatosis, please go to page 101.