

May is National Hepatitis Awareness Month

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Health officials advise all people between the age of 48 and 68 to get a hepatitis C test. In observance of Hepatitis Awareness Month (May), health officials are calling for all U.S. baby boomers - the generation born from 1945 through 1965 - to get a one-time test for the hepatitis C virus. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, there are currently about 39,000 people living with hepatitis C in Minnesota.

Hepatitis C causes serious liver diseases, including liver cancer (the fastest-rising cause of cancer-related deaths) and is the leading cause of liver transplants in the United States. Hepatitis C is usually spread by blood, through sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, hepatitis C was also unknowingly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. One in 30 baby boomers has been infected with hepatitis C and most don't know it.

"To identify undetected cases, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are recommending a one-time blood test for hepatitis C for everyone between the ages of 48 and 68," said Dr. Edward Ehlinger, Minnesota Commissioner of Health. "Following the new recommendations can protect the health of an entire generation of Americans from liver disease and save thousands of lives."

More than 15,000 Americans, most of them baby boomers, die each year from hepatitis C-related illness, such as cirrhosis and liver cancer, and deaths have been increasing steadily for over a decade and are projected to grow significantly in coming years. More than 2 million U.S. baby boomers are infected with hepatitis C - accounting for more than 75 percent of all American adults living with the virus.

"Studies show that many individuals were infected with the virus decades ago, do not perceive themselves to be at risk, and have never been screened," said Ehlinger. "Getting tested and treated now can offset many of the long term consequences."

CDC estimates one-time hepatitis C testing of people between 48 and 68 years of age could identify more than 800,000 additional people with hepatitis C. With newly available therapies that can cure up to 75 percent of infections, expanded testing - along with linkage to appropriate care and treatment - would prevent the costly consequences of liver cancer and other chronic liver diseases and save more than 120,000 lives.

Health officials recommend baby boomers and others who may have had blood exposures talk with their health care provider about getting a test for hepatitis C. For additional information about hepatitis C testing recommendations, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/knowmorehepatitis/index.htm>