

Addressing Hepatitis C Disparities in the African American Community

March 8, 2013 By Christopher Bates

As we celebrate Black History Month, here at HHS we are also reminded of troubling hepatitis C disparities that persist in the African American community.

African Americans are twice as likely to be infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) compared to the general U.S. population, [according to the CDC](#). While African Americans represent only 12 percent of the U.S. population, they make up roughly 22 percent of the estimated 3.2 million persons with chronic HCV infection. Moreover, chronic liver disease, often hepatitis C-related, is a leading cause of death among African Americans ages 45-64.

"Despite the seriousness of this health problem in the African American community, too few African Americans know about the disease or get tested for it. Early detection of chronic viral hepatitis infection can save lives," observes Dr. Ronald Valdiserri, MD, MPH, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health, Infectious Diseases and Director, Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Many people can get care and treatment that can limit disease progression, prevent liver cancer deaths, and help break the cycle of unknowingly transmitting the virus to others."

Agencies across the government are collaborating to implement the Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis. The plan's goals include increasing the proportion of Americans who are aware of their viral hepatitis infection and reducing the number of new cases of hepatitis C infection. To achieve these goals, the plan prioritizes education efforts to address viral hepatitis-related disparities.

We need your help to achieve these goals, reduce the disproportionate burden of hepatitis C, and increase awareness of this silent killer in the African American community.

Learn the Facts

The first step to reducing this disparity in the African American community is increasing awareness about hepatitis C:

- Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by a virus.

- Hepatitis C is usually spread when blood from a person infected with the hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen from sharing equipment for injecting drugs, receiving blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, getting a needlestick injury in health care settings, and even being born to a mother who has Hepatitis C. And some people don't know how they got infected. Hepatitis C can spread through sexual intercourse, but it's rare.
- Anyone can get hepatitis C, but African Americans – as well as people born between 1945-1965, sometimes called “babyboomers” – bear a disproportionate burden of disease.
- Most people living with hepatitis C do not know they are infected.
- The hepatitis C virus (HCV) can cause chronic hepatitis, in which the infection is prolonged, sometimes lifelong. Chronic hepatitis can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure, and liver cancer. In fact, viral hepatitis is the leading cause of liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplantation.
- People living with HCV infection often have no symptoms until significant damage has been done.
- There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.
- Getting a blood test is the only way to know if you have been exposed to hepatitis C.
- New and improved treatments exist for hepatitis C.

Learn more here, [“Viral Hepatitis in the African American Community”](#) [PDF 432 KB] and from the CDC's webpage, [Hepatitis C in the African American Community](#).

Inform Others

We also need your help in educating your family and friends about hepatitis C. Share what you've learned and encourage conversations with healthcare providers about screening for hepatitis C for those who may have been exposed.

To support national efforts to raise awareness about this important health problem, a number of helpful resources and tools have been developed by colleagues across HHS. Please consider using these in your work or sharing them with your friends and family:

- Hepatitis BadgeHepatitis Risk Assessment – Find out if you should be tested by taking a 5-minute [online Hepatitis Risk Assessment](#). It allows you to determine your risk for viral hepatitis by answering questions privately, either at home or a health care setting. You can then print tailored recommendations based on CDC’s testing and vaccination guidelines for viral hepatitis to discuss with their doctor. Try the Hepatitis Risk Assessment out for yourself! Then help us spread the word about the tool by downloading free Hepatitis Risk Assessment [web buttons and badges](#) (like the sample at right) to feature on your website and by sending out the [online health e-card](#) to your family, friends, and/or colleagues.
- Posters – CDC has also produced [two posters](#) that you can print and share to help educate African Americans about the importance of hepatitis C screening. One features U.S. Surgeon General Regina Benjamin. Consider printing these out and posting them in your work place, church, community center or other places where they could help increase awareness about hepatitis C screening.

All of us can contribute to “combating the silent epidemic of viral hepatitis” among African Americans. Please join us.

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