Get Screened for Hep C

What you don't know can hurt you.

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Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals that hepatitis C is still widely underdiagnosed. But new health care protocols (most came into effect at the start of the year) require doctors to offer the hep C test to all patients from the baby boomer generation—those born between 1945 and 1965.

"We're working with clinicians to understand the importance of testing," says John Ward, MD, a hepatitis specialist with the CDC. "We're also looking for ways to use the advances in electronic health records across the country." For example, when patients check into a clinic, if they're from the baby boomer generation, then a pop-up alert will tell the clinicians to test the patients for hepatitis C.

There's also a need to screen for hep C outside of traditional medical settings, explains Charles Howell, MD, of the National Medical Association. "The majority of the patients with HCV are male. But, unfortunately, males are not into health care," he says. If you peeked into to a doctor's waiting room, you wouldn't see a lot of men, Howell adds. "Since folks won't come in to get tested, health providers must take the tests to the people."

This means going to church events, community centers, rallies and other social gatherings. In these settings, health care workers can use what are called rapid tests. Typically, these handheld devices use a simple finger-stick procedure that can draw and test blood and deliver a result in 20 minutes.

The CDC emphasizes the importance of educating groups considered most at risk, particularly African Americans. "Possibly one in every five people with hepatitis C in the United States is African American," Howell says. "If we really want to have an impact in decreasing the burden of HCV on the health care system, we need to focus on these disproportionate groups."

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