Using KakaoTalk to Boost Hepatitis B Awareness Among Korean Americans

Asian Americans account for 7% of the U.S. population but more than 50% of all hepatitis B cases. An app can help reach them.

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Social media apps are a “feasible and effective” way to promote hepatitis B awareness among Korean Americans, a population that sees unusually high rates of the liver disease, according to researchers at George Mason University.

Specifically, a pilot study successfully delivered a culturally targeted hepatitis B campaign titled “Let’s Talk About Liver Cancer” to Korean Americans through KakaoTalk, a social media app used by over 95% of Koreans, according to a George Mason press release.

Hepatitis B is 10 times more prevalent among Asian Americans than among non-Hispanicwhite Americans. What’s more, according to the researchers, Asian Americans account for 7% of the U.S. population but more than 50% of all hepatitis B cases.

“The high prevalence of [hepatitis B virus, or HBV] infection and liver cancer mortality rates in Asian Americans is one of the most neglected and understudied cancer disparities,” said lead study researcher Alicia Hong, PhD, a professor of health administration and policy at George Mason, in the release. “We advocate for more research and practice to deliver culturally tailored public health programs for underserved populations via social media apps used by the target groups.”

Viral hepatitis attacks the liver, which acts as the body’s filter. In fact, hepatitis means “inflammation of the liver.” It can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, the need for a liver transplant and death. Although there is no cure for hep B, treatment and effective vaccines are available. According to Hep’s Basics on Hepatitis B Transmission:

> Hepatitis B virus is highly contagious and may be present in blood and body fluids, including semen and vaginal secretions. The saliva of people with hep B may contain evidence of the virus but in such small concentrations that kissing does not spread HBV. Here are the most common ways hepatitis B is transmitted:

- Sex with an infected partner
- Acquired at birth from an infected mother
- Sharing injection drug equipment (including needles, syringes, cookers, drug-preparation equipment)
- Contact with blood or open sores of an infected person
- Needlestick or other skin puncture
- Sharing items such as glucose monitors, razors or toothbrushes with an infected person.

> Hepatitis B may also be spread through non-injection drugs (for example, cocaine straws and crack pipes) as a result of exposure to blood. An unsterilized instrument may transmit HBV during acupuncture, tattooing and body piercing. A human bite may spread hepatitis B.
>
> Hep B is not spread through food or water, sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, hand holding, coughing or sneezing.
>
> HBV may live outside the body for at least seven days and still be potentially infectious.

Nearly 862,000 people are living with hep B in the United States. Foreign-born Asian Americans are at particularly high risk, the George Mason researchers note, adding that the population faces barriers such as stigma, lack of awareness about hep B, limited access to health care due to immigrant status and limited English proficiency.

The pilot study included a four-week hepatitis awareness campaign consisting of video clips and pictorial messages created for Korean Americans.

In the study findings, published in Digital Health, the authors describe the results and conclusions as follows:

> Out of the 100 participants of KA [Korean Americans], 56 were female and the mean age was 60. Most have lived in the U.S. for more than 20 years, 84% had limited English proficiency and 21% had a family history of HBV infection or liver cancer. After a four-week intervention, 95% completed the follow-up survey. Participants reported significant improvements in HBV-

related knowledge, liver cancer prevention knowledge, perceived benefits of HBV testing, perceived risks of HBV infection, injunctive norms of HBV testing and self-efficacy of HBV testing.

The KakaoTalk–based liver cancer prevention program for KAs was feasible and effective. We advocate for community-academia partnership to develop and implement culturally appropriate and social media–based interventions for underserved immigrants.

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