

HEPATITIS C:

AN EPIDEMIC WITHIN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

The hepatitis C virus is a national public health crisis that is even more devastating among African Americans, who are twice as likely to be infected. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), prevalence of the virus is 3 percent among African Americans, compared to 1.5 percent in the general population. African Americans made up about 13 percent of the U.S. population from 1999-2002, yet they made up nearly 23 percent of patients living with hepatitis C.

HEPATITIS C IS A GROWING PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS, LARGELY BECAUSE THE VAST MAJORITY OF INFECTED INDIVIDUALS ARE UNAWARE THAT THEY HAVE THE VIRUS.

A SILENT KILLER IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

African Americans are not only more likely to have hepatitis C; they are also more likely to die as a result of the virus. According to CDC data for the year 2011, the hepatitis C mortality rate per 100,000 people of a certain race was 4 for Caucasians and 7.72 – nearly double – for African Americans. Within the African American community, chronic liver disease, which is often hepatitis C-related, is a leading cause of death among people between the ages of 45 and 64. About 9.4 percent of African Americans in their 40s are, or have been, infected with chronic hepatitis C – compared to 3.8 percent of Caucasians.

INCREASED AWARENESS & TESTING IS NECESSARY TO FIGHT HEPATITIS C

Hepatitis C screening for at-risk patients is critical to improve awareness, connect patients with treatment, and prevent new infections. Yet research shows that African Americans are less likely to get tested – even when they are at-risk.

According to the National Medical Association, the leading voice of African American physicians, African Americans are much less likely to be screened for hepatitis C, even in the presence of known risk factors. They are also less likely to be referred to a sub-specialist for consideration of treatment.

All Americans need to hear the message that hepatitis C, while rampant, is preventable, often treatable, and detected through a simple diagnostic test. Screening for hepatitis C is the first step to connect infected individuals with treatment and to prevent the disease from spreading. Empowering African Americans and other at-risk individuals to know their hepatitis C status is the first step in the fight against this silent killer.

HEPATITIS C FACTS

- 3.2 million Americans are estimated to be living with hepatitis C – the leading cause of catastrophic liver damage (cirrhosis), liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplants.
- Up to 75 percent of individuals living with hepatitis C do not realize they are infected because the disease often takes years, or even decades, to cause symptoms.
- While the virus remains undetected, causing potentially life-threatening liver damage, individuals can unknowingly transmit the disease to others.
- Hepatitis C is most prevalent among baby boomers, who are five times more likely to be infected. In fact, 75 percent of Americans living with hepatitis C were born between 1945 and 1965.
- Hepatitis C disproportionately affects minority Americans. Prevalence of the virus is 3 percent among African Americans and 2.6 percent among Latinos, compared to 1.5 percent of the general population. Prevalence is highest among American Indians.
- Unless current trends are reversed, the CDC predicts that deaths due to the virus will double or even triple in the next 20 years.

Source: The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention



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