

# VIRAL HEPATITIS:

## EFFORTS TO COMBAT A SILENT EPIDEMIC

The impact of hepatitis C is especially devastating because the vast majority of infected individuals do not realize they carry the virus. Undiagnosed hepatitis C is the leading cause of catastrophic liver damage, cirrhosis, liver transplants and liver cancer – the fastest-rising cause of cancer-related deaths.

Baby boomers – the generation born from 1945 through 1965 – are most at-risk. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that one in 30 baby boomers has been infected with hepatitis C. The virus also disproportionately affects minorities and veterans.

Despite the widespread nature of this infectious disease, testing for hepatitis C is not as common as it should be.

RECOGNIZING THAT SCREENING IS CRITICAL TO CONNECTING INFECTED AMERICANS WITH TREATMENT AND TO PREVENTING DISEASE TRANSMISSION, HEALTH AUTHORITIES AND POLICYMAKERS ARE TAKING ACTION.

### NATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The CDC, the United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) all recommend one-time hepatitis C screening for baby boomers, and such testing is covered by Medicare and private insurance plans.

### FEDERAL LEGISLATION

“The Viral Hepatitis Testing Act” – legislation currently pending before the U.S. Senate (S. 2538) and House of Representatives (H.R. 3723) – would authorize \$80 million over three years to create the first comprehensive national system to combat viral hepatitis. The legislation would enhance and strengthen surveillance, education, testing, and linkage to care – with the priority of reaching Americans who are most at-risk.

### STATE GOVERNMENT ACTION

State lawmakers are taking legislative action to connect at-risk individuals with testing. Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York recently enacted legislation requiring primary health care providers to offer one-time hepatitis C screening to all patients born between 1945 and 1965, and Colorado enacted legislation formally recommending such testing. Similar legislation requiring that primary care providers offer one-time screening to baby boomers has been introduced in California, Illinois, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

SUCCESS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HEPATITIS C DEMANDS SWIFT ACTION. JOIN OTHER HEALTH CARE STAKEHOLDERS IN ADVOCATING FOR THE FEDERAL VIRAL HEPATITIS TESTING ACT; DEMANDING ACTION FROM STATE LAWMAKERS; AND PROMOTING CRITICAL COMMUNITY-BASED EFFORTS TO IMPROVE OVERALL AWARENESS AND TESTING FOR THOSE AT-RISK.

### HEPATITIS C FACTS

- 3.2 million Americans are estimated to be living with hepatitis C – the top cause of liver cancer and most common reason for liver transplants.
- The majority (65-75 percent) of infected Americans do not know their status.
- 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.
- Nearly 186,000 cases of chronic hepatitis C infection were submitted to the CDC in 2011, despite limited testing and reporting.
- More than 15,000 Americans, most of them baby boomers, die each year from hepatitis C-related illness, such as cirrhosis or liver cancer.
- Hepatitis C is now responsible for more annual deaths in the U.S. than HIV.
- 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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