

New Hepatitis C Recommendations

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This month I am reprinting an article from the *Public Health Notes*, November/December issue that I felt was important for members of our community, many of whom are baby boomers.

New recommendations were recently made by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on testing for the viral liver disease hepatitis C. It is estimated that 1 in 30 baby boomers (people born in the U.S. from 1945 through 1965) has been infected by hepatitis C and most of them don't know it.

If left untreated, the virus can cause serious liver diseases, including liver cancer (the fastest-rising cause of cancer-related deaths) and is the leading cause of liver transplants in the United States. The new recommendation is intended to avert major increases in liver disease and deaths in the United States.

The virus is transmitted through blood, such as illegal injection drug use, tattooing with a dirty needle, or to healthcare workers through accidental needle stick injuries with infected blood. Before hepatitis C was identified, people became infected through such means as blood transfusions, organ transplants, and hemodialysis, but these exposures very rarely lead to infection anymore. A single blood test should be part of every baby boomer's healthcare," said Dr. José Montero. "Since the virus was only discovered in 1989, many people may have become infected and never realized it."

CDC estimates one-time hepatitis C testing of baby boomers could identify more than 800,000 additional cases. And with newly available therapies that can cure up to 75 percent of infections, expanded testing— along with linkage to appropriate care and treatment— would prevent the costly consequences of liver cancer and other chronic liver diseases and save more than 120,000 lives.

For more information, visit the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis.