



District 2 Public Health

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DATE: May 10, 2012

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May is Hepatitis Awareness Month

GAINESVILLE, GA -- Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver and refers to a group of viral infections that affect the liver. The most common types of Hepatitis are Hepatitis A, B, and C. Hepatitis A infection can last for several weeks to several months but does not lead to chronic hepatitis.

Two types of hepatitis - B and C - can lead to chronic, life-long infections. According to the CDC, viral hepatitis is the leading cause of liver cancer and approximately 4.4 million Americans are living with chronic hepatitis. Many people with chronic hepatitis do not know that they are infected.

Vaccines offer individuals protection from the hepatitis A and B virus and people that take certain precautions can reduce their risk for exposure and infection of hepatitis A, B, and C. But there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

Because chronic hepatitis often does not cause any symptoms until serious liver damage has been done, testing for hepatitis is crucial. The CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis developed an online risk assessment and launched the tool on May 7, 2012. (<http://www.cdc.gov/HEPATITIS/riskassessment/>) The online assessment is designed to determine an individual's risk for viral hepatitis and asks questions based upon CDC's guidelines for testing and vaccination. The Hepatitis Risk Assessment allows individuals to answer questions privately, either in their home or in a health care setting, and print their recommendations to discuss with their health care provider. Your local health department can provide hepatitis A and B vaccinations and additional information about hepatitis and the vaccines.

Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for all children at age 1 year, for persons who are at increased risk for infection, for persons who are at increased risk for complications from Hepatitis A, and for anyone wishing to obtain immunity. The virus is spread by ingesting food or drink contaminated by fecal matter that contains the virus - usually a result of poor hand washing by those preparing the

food or beverage. It is commonly passed among young children by sharing contaminated toys, food or drink. Hepatitis A infection can last for several weeks or even months but it does not lead to chronic infection. Certain groups of people are more at risk for Hepatitis A and should also get vaccinated, including: persons living in or traveling to areas with high hepatitis A rates (especially outside of the U.S.), persons who work in health care or child care, persons with health conditions like HIV that weaken the immune system, intravenous drug users, and men who have sex with men.

Hepatitis B is a serious illness and the CDC recommends vaccination for anyone in the following groups of people: hemodialysis patients or those who have end-stage renal disease; have chronic liver disease; have a job that involves contact with human blood such as a laboratory worker; on the staff of, or a client in, an institution for the developmentally disabled; live or travel for more than 6 months a year in countries where hepatitis B is common; live in the same house as a person with hepatitis B virus infection or have sex with a person with hepatitis B; persons that have sex with more than one partner; persons that seek care in a clinic for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV testing or treatment, or drug treatment; men who have sex with other men; persons that inject drugs; or are a prisoner in a correctional facility.

There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C. It is spread by exposure to infected blood primarily through sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. It can also be spread accidentally with needle stick injuries in a health care setting, or unsafe injection or infection control practices. Individuals can help protect themselves by not sharing needles or injecting drugs, following safe injection practices and observing safe infection control practices.

Mothers infected with hepatitis C pass the virus along to their newborn and people who had blood transfusions and organ transplants prior to 1992 (when hepatitis C screening began) can get the virus from infected blood or organs.

For more information about Hepatitis Awareness Month or the online risk assessment tool, visit the links below:

Online Hepatitis Risk Assessment Tool (available May 7):

<http://www.cdc.gov/HEPATITIS/riskassessment/>

For information on Hepatitis A, go to: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/ChooseA.htm>

For information on Hepatitis B, go to: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/ChooseB.htm>

For information on Hepatitis C, go to: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/ChooseC.htm>

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