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CDC EXPANDS TESTING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHRONIC HEPATITIS B VIRUS INFECTION

New Guidance Also Issued on Patient Management for Those Infected

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) today published new recommendations for health care providers that are designed to increase routine testing in the United States for chronic hepatitis B, a major cause of liver disease and liver cancer. CDC recommends testing all individuals born in Asia and Africa, as well as testing additional at-risk populations, including men who have sex with men (MSM) and injection-drug users (IDUs). The recommendations, published today in CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) Recommendations & Reports, also for the first time give health professionals guidance for effective management of chronically infected hepatitis B patients.

"Chronic hepatitis B affects the lives of more than one million Americans, many of whom do not even know they are infected. These new recommendations are critical to identifying people who are living with the disease without the benefits of medical attention," said John W. Ward, M.D., director of CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis. "Testing is the first step to identify infected persons so that they can receive lifesaving care and treatment, which can break the cycle of transmission, slow disease progression, and prevent deaths from liver cancer."

In the United States, chronic hepatitis B is the underlying cause of an estimated 2,000 – 4,000 deaths each year from cirrhosis and liver cancer. The CDC recommendations are key to increasing the early diagnosis of chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection, since many of the estimated 800,000 – 1.4 million Americans with chronic HBV infection have no symptoms and are unaware of their disease.

Highlights of the recommendations

The new testing recommendations build upon and reinforce past recommendations to test all pregnant women, infants born to infected mothers, household contacts and sex partners of infected individuals, and people with HIV.

Along with continued testing of those groups, routine testing is now recommended for additional populations, including:

- Individuals born in Asia, Africa, and other geographic regions with 2 percent or higher prevalence of chronic HBV infections: Previous CDC recommendations called for testing of people born in areas with 8 percent prevalence or higher. Expanded testing is essential since the rate of liver cancer deaths and chronic HBV in the United States remains high among foreign-born U.S. populations from these areas. For example, nearly one in 12 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders living in the United States is HBV-infected, and one-third or more are unaware.
- Men who have sex with men and injection drug users: Routine testing is needed for these persons since both have a higher prevalence of chronic HBV infection than the overall U.S. population. Up to 3 percent of MSM and up to 6 percent of IDUs are estimated to be chronically infected with HBV, compared to three tenths of one percent of the general population.
- Persons with abnormal liver function tests (not explained by other conditions) and persons who require immunosuppressive therapy (e.g., chemotherapy for malignant diseases).

The new CDC report also gives recommendations for referral of HBV-infected persons to specialists for ongoing monitoring and medical care. Such guidelines are needed now to assist providers, since most of the effective medications for chronic HBV treatment have become available only in the last five years. In addition, the recommendations advise healthcare providers to provide culturally-sensitive ongoing patient education, begin lifelong monitoring for progression of liver disease, and ensure protection of household members and other close contacts of infected persons.

Testing recommendations are a critical component of CDC's strategy to eliminate HBV transmission. CDC continues to work with the medical community to promote comprehensive prevention and treatment efforts for HBV, which include vaccination for all infants and at-risk adults; catch-up vaccination of previously unvaccinated children; routine screening for all pregnant women; treatment of newborns of infected or untested mothers; and testing household contacts and sex partners of HBV-infected persons.

For more information chronic hepatitis B infection, visit www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HBV/TestingChronic or www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/.

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