

What Every Asian American Should Know About Chronic Hepatitis B



One of the greatest health disparities between Asian Americans and Caucasian Americans is the increased number of people with chronic hepatitis B and liver cancer in the Asian community. One in 10 Asian Americans is infected with chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) compared to 1 in 1,000 Caucasian Americans.¹ The staggering fact is that most people infected with the virus do not even know it because it is a "silent infection," meaning that most people do not have noticeable symptoms. There are an estimated 350 million people worldwide infected with HBV and up to 1.4 million in the U.S.² More than half of those infected in the U.S. are Asians or Pacific Islanders.³

Hepatitis B is a virus that infects the liver. Chronic hepatitis B differs from acute hepatitis B because it is a long-term infection. It can cause cirrhosis and liver cancer, and can lead to premature death. There is no cure, but if the virus is found early enough, treatment is available to slow the progression of the disease. HBV is spread through: mother to child, direct contact with blood, and sexual contact. The majority of Asian Americans commonly become infected from a chronically infected mother during birth. Transmission occurs through blood, semen, or other body fluids infected with the virus. There are certain parts of Asia, the Pacific Islands, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and areas of South America where hepatitis B is common. Therefore, chronic carriers from these areas can unknowingly spread the disease to others, including household members. HBV can also be spread by sharing household items (such as toothbrushes, nail clippers, or razors) or needles that may be contaminated with blood and through

direct wound-to-wound contact. HBV is not transmitted through food or water, sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing. Chronic carriers should not be excluded from work, school, or any other daily activities. There is no reason to distance yourself from those infected with HBV, but take precautions to prevent exposures to blood and sexual fluids.

Most people who have HBV have no symptoms and can feel healthy, that is why it is so important to get tested. Routine blood work does not test for HBV. It must be specifically requested. Since most people have no symptoms and can unknowingly pass the disease to others, screening for the virus can prevent the spread to loved ones. When symptoms do occur, often the disease has already damaged the liver and it is too late for treatment to be effective. A blood test will help determine whether or not a person is chronically infected or needs vaccination. **Get tested to know your status.** Knowing your status can help you start living healthier to protect your liver. You can slow the progression of the virus to prevent cirrhosis and liver cancer, and you can protect your family and friends by taking precautions with bodily fluids and making sure they are vaccinated. Ask your doctor for a blood test. If you do not have a regular doctor, the Orange County Health Department offers free screening and hepatitis vaccinations for persons at risk for infection. Look for details about the Orange County Health Department hepatitis programs and information on vaccinations in upcoming articles.

It is important for the Asian community to be



aware of this disease because it affects Asians so disproportionately. To raise awareness of HBV, the Orange County Health Department is providing information and education through community presentations and consultations. If you are interested in learning more about the disease, or are an organization willing to host a 30 minute presentation, please contact Jessica Fung at Jessica_fung@doh.state.fl.us or 407-858-1400 X 1351.

For more information on HBV, visit the Orange County Health Department's website at www.orchd.com.

Sources:

1. Asian Liver Center, Stanford University School of Medicine. <http://liver.stanford.edu/Education/faq.html>. Retrieved on November 10, 2009.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Viral Hepatitis, Statistics and Surveillance. <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/Statistics.htm>. Retrieved on November 10, 2009.
3. Kuehn, B. Silent epidemic of viral hepatitis may lead to boom in serious liver disease. *JAMA*. 2009; 302(18): 1949-1954.

