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TDH ISSUES PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY ON HEPATITIS C EPIDEMIC
Disease that Can Destroy Livers on the Rise

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – The Tennessee Department of Health is issuing a public health advisory urging residents to increase their awareness about Hepatitis C, a life-threatening disease spread by direct contact with blood from an infected person. The rate of acute Hepatitis C cases in Tennessee has more than tripled in the last seven years, and the steadily increasing number of cases may only represent "the tip of the iceberg" of the state's Hepatitis-C epidemic, according to TDH Commissioner John Dreyzehner, MD, MPH.

"In addition to reported cases of acute Hepatitis C it is estimated that more than 100,000 Tennesseans may be living with chronic Hepatitis C and not know it," Dreyzehner said. "Many people have Hepatitis C for years, not realizing it, while the viral infection slowly destroys their livers."

To see the advisory, go to http://tn.gov/health/article/health-advisories.

There is no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C, so efforts to avoid exposure to infected blood are most important in preventing the spread of the disease. Most of the increase in transmission of Hepatitis C in Tennessee is due to the sharing of contaminated needles and syringes among intravenous drug users who are abusing both legal and illegal pain medicines.

Once infected with Hepatitis C, some people may recover fully, but most, 70 to 85 percent, will develop long-term infection. Early symptoms of Hepatitis C infection can include fatigue, abdominal pain, itching and dark urine. Many people, however, are not aware they have the disease until the virus has already caused liver cancer or liver damage.

"We strongly encourage those who suspect they might be infected to seek testing as soon as possible," Dreyzehner said. "Testing can be done by a private health care provider and in some county health departments. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends all individuals born from 1945 to 1965 be tested, as well as individuals of any age who have any specific risk factors, including a history of injection drug use or unsanitary tattooing or piercing. If chronic Hepatitis C infection is present, a doctor can recommend treatment options. The sooner an infection is identified and treatment started, the better a person's chances are for recovery."

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The treatment for Hepatitis C is currently expensive and a person can later become re-infected. A recent CDC report shows Hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States, with approximately three million people living with the infection. That report, available online at www.cdc.gov/mmwR/pdf/wk/mm6417.pdf, includes information about a 364 percent increase in Hepatitis C in four Appalachian states, including Tennessee, between 2006 and 2012.

"The best way to prevent Hepatitis C infection is to avoid recreational use of pain medicines, to avoid injecting drugs, and to not let those you love become dependent on or inject pain medicines or other illicit drugs such as heroin and methamphetamines," Dreyzehner said. "We must all work more aggressively to reduce Hepatitis C in our communities; left unchecked, it will destroy families and wreak havoc on communities."

The mission of the Tennessee Department of Health is to protect, promote and improve the health and prosperity of people in Tennessee. TDH has facilities in all 95 counties and provides direct services for more than one in five Tennesseans annually as well as indirect services for everyone in the state, including emergency response to health threats, licensure of health professionals, regulation of health care facilities and inspection of food service establishments. Learn more about TDH services and programs at www.tn.gov/health.

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