



# SPOTLIGHT ON HEALTH



## Survey Reveals Significant Lack Of Awareness Of Highly Contagious Liver Disease

(NAPSA)—According to a national survey released by the American Liver Foundation (ALF), many parents do not know how hepatitis A affects the body, how severe the disease can be or how it is transmitted.

However, hepatitis A, which kills 100 Americans each year, is one of the most prevalent vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States today.

According to a recent study published in *Pediatrics*, it is estimated that young children account for up to one half of all reported cases of hepatitis A. These survey findings show that low awareness, misunderstanding and confusion surrounding the disease are a few of the underlying factors why an easily preventable disease remains widespread in the U.S.

The survey revealed that almost half (43 percent) of U.S. parents are not aware of the critical health implications associated with hepatitis A, a disease that can cause severe complications of the liver and even death in rare cases.

Forty percent are not aware the disease can be fatal. Additionally, many parents do not know how the disease is transmitted, putting a large number of people at risk for infection.

“There has been a large public focus on hepatitis B and C, but people need to be educated about hepatitis A,” said Dr. Philip Rosenthal, Professor of Pediatrics and Surgery at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine. “Most importantly, they need to understand that vaccination, particularly among children, is the most effective tool in preventing the spread of the disease.

According to the ALF, parents need to be educated about hepati-



**Less than half of the parents answering a recent survey knew that a vaccine exists to protect children against hepatitis A.**

tis A and how the disease is transmitted because the highest incidence of cases occurs among children under 10 years of age. Even though infected children may not always display symptoms of the disease, they serve as a “reservoir” for the virus, easily passing it to adults who can develop severe symptoms, liver disease and even death in rare cases.

Although the hepatitis A vaccine is available for children over two, awareness of the vaccine is also very low.

Only three percent of parents mentioned hepatitis A when asked what diseases their children should be vaccinated against. Less than half (46 percent) of those parents aware of hepatitis A know that a vaccine for the disease exists.

Physicians play a very influential role in educating parents about vaccine-preventable diseases. As indicated by these survey findings, over 90 percent of parents rely on their pediatrician to tell them what vaccinations their children need.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization

Practices (ACIP) recommends that states with hepatitis A incidence rates that are at least two times greater than the national average implement routine hepatitis A vaccination programs for children.

“By effectively increasing awareness and understanding of this highly contagious liver disease, parents will be encouraged to vaccinate their children and themselves,” said Alan P. Brownstein, President and Chief Executive Officer of the American Liver Foundation. “As a result, we will see a decrease in the number of reported hepatitis A cases in the country.”

Hepatitis A, an infection of the liver, is spread via the fecal-oral route, through close personal contact or the ingestion of contaminated water or food. Symptoms of the disease can be debilitating and include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort, jaundice and dark urine. Infected individuals can unknowingly infect others up to two weeks prior to feeling ill themselves. On average, people miss about 30 days of work when they are infected with the virus that causes hepatitis A. Up to 22 percent of adult hepatitis A patients require hospitalization and more than 100 people in this country die every year from the consequences of the disease.

The ALF is a leading national voluntary health agency dedicated to the prevention and cure of viral hepatitis and other liver disease through research and education. For additional information about hepatitis A or other forms of viral hepatitis and liver disease, contact the ALF at: 1-888-4HEP-ABC or visit [www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org).

The survey was funded with a grant from GlaxoSmithKline.