

# HEALTH AWARENESS

## Baby Boomers At Risk For Hepatitis C

(NAPS)—Millions of Americans are infected with the hepatitis C virus and many of them do not know it. In fact, it is possible for someone to have hepatitis C without showing any symptoms for decades while the infection silently causes damage to the liver. Hepatitis C can be effectively treated but it has to be detected first. By screening people who have the highest risk of infection, up to 15,000 deaths caused by hepatitis C may be prevented each year.

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) recently recommended that adults born between 1945 and 1965 be screened for hepatitis C virus infection. So why is screening recommended for these baby boomers? Because three out of four people who are infected with hepatitis C were born during this time period. They likely became infected during the 1970s and 1980s when hepatitis C infection rates were the highest. Additionally, the Task Force recommends that anyone—including baby boomers—who is an active or past intravenous drug user or had blood transfusions before 1992 (before blood was properly checked for the virus) undergo screening. This recommendation applies to adults who have no signs or symptoms of hepatitis C virus infection and no prior diagnosis of liver disease or liver function problems. By successfully screening people who are at risk, hepatitis C can be identified and treatment can begin, possibly preventing damage from the infection and subsequent liver disease.

### Who Should Be Tested?

The Task Force recommends that all baby boomers should be screened once for hepatitis C virus infection. There are other factors



**Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is detected through blood tests.**

that may put a person at risk for acquiring the virus, and these people should receive screening, too. For example, people who use or have used intravenous drugs, had a blood transfusion before 1992, have multiple sex partners, or received a tattoo in unsterile conditions are at increased risk of being infected with hepatitis C and should be screened. While the Task Force recommends that baby boomers and others without ongoing risk factors only need to be screened one time, people who continue to engage in activities that increase their risk of hepatitis C, such as those who use injection drugs, should be screened regularly.

### Hepatitis And Your Liver

Hepatitis C progresses slowly, meaning symptoms may take years to appear or may never develop. Even though there may be no signs of infection, hepatitis C is a serious and potentially deadly virus. Because hepatitis C attacks

the liver, it can lead to cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, end-stage liver disease, and liver cancer.

### Screening And Treatment Can Save Lives

Screening is a two-phase process that starts by testing blood to identify if hepatitis C is present and how much virus is in the blood. Once hepatitis C is detected, health care providers can prescribe medications that rid the body of the virus and prevent long-term damage to the liver. People who test positive for hepatitis C virus infection but do not have signs of liver damage can be monitored, and treated only if the virus becomes active.

“Millions of people in the United States are infected with hepatitis C, and many are unaware of their condition because they may not have any symptoms,” says Task Force co-vic chair Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, Ph.D., M.D. “Hepatitis C infection is a leading cause of liver damage, liver cancer and liver transplants in the United States. Screening for hepatitis C may help people who are infected to avoid these complications.”

### Recommendations To Protect Your Health

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is an independent group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine. People who may be at risk for hepatitis C should share questions with their doctor and possibly explore getting tested. Recently, the Task Force examined the scientific research on screening for hepatitis C virus infection and issued specific recommendations.

For more information on the Task Force and to read the full report on hepatitis C, visit [www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org](http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org).