National Hepatitis Testing Day

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BURLINGTON – May 19 is National Hepatitis Testing Day. The Health Department reminds Vermonters at risk to get tested for Hepatitis C, a form of viral hepatitis that is spread through blood to blood contact.

Based on national estimates, as many as 18,000 Vermont residents have chronic Hepatitis C, also known as Hep C. About three-quarters of them are unaware of their infection, because it can be years or decades before symptoms develop.

There are two groups of people who are of particular concern when it comes to Hep C. National data indicates that a significant number of baby boomers (people born between 1945 through 1965) have the virus and are unaware of it. People in this age group may have been exposed through blood transfusions or other blood products received before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992.

Others may have become infected from sharing injection drug equipment in the past.

The sharing of drug syringes is associated with most new cases of Hep C infection. It is such an efficient route of transmission that injection drug users are at the highest risk of acquiring the virus today.

“Evidence of this behavior-to-virus connection is playing out in rural Indiana in an HIV and Hep C outbreak that’s been in the news of late,” says Patsy Kelso, state epidemiologist for infectious disease.

According to the CDC, as of April 21, 2015, 135 people were diagnosed with HIV in an Indiana community of 4,200 people. Of these, 114 cases were found to be co-infected with Hep C. Injection drug using behavior was reported by 108 of the cases, with four reporting no injection drug use, and another 23 people not yet interviewed.

“Vermonters who inject drugs can be hard to reach with programs designed to help keep them healthy,” said Kelso. “There is a high level of stigma directed toward them.”

Yet, according to the Health Department, Vermont has some resources in place that might help to decrease the potential for an outbreak of the magnitude that it is occurring in Indiana.

“The Health Department funds four syringe exchange programs throughout the state intended to help people stop sharing injection equipment – the route of transmission for Hep C and HIV,” said Kelso. Syringe exchange programs had to be set up on an emergency provisional basis in Indiana. “We provide support for Hep C and HIV testing that is specifically designed to be accessed by injection drug users at syringe exchanges and other support programs in place to help this population,” said Kelso.

For more information about Hepatitis C go to healthvermont.gov or visit your local Health Department district office.

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