

Stopping the Silent Killer: Hepatitis B Among Asian Americans

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

Hello. This is Dr. John Ward from the Division of Viral Hepatitis at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Hepatitis B is a liver disease that's caused by the hepatitis B virus, or HBV. It's a common but preventable cause of death. About 350 million people worldwide are living with chronic HBV infection, and each year 650,000 die prematurely from hepatitis B-related diseases, including liver cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer.

The hepatitis B virus is spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen through sexual contact, through blood exposures in the health care workplace, or through injection drug use, and it can also be spread from a mother to her infant during childbirth.

The good news is that hepatitis B can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine. Widespread vaccination of children in the United States has dramatically reduced new cases of this disease. However, up to 1.4 million people in the United States are living with chronic HBV infection. They're at risk for serious health consequences if they're not identified and managed appropriately. With proper evaluation and care, people with hepatitis B can live long and healthy lives.

For Asians and Pacific Islanders in the U.S., hepatitis B is a particular concern.

- As many as 1 in 10 Asian Americans are believed to have hepatitis B. Most were infected when they were children and were living in a part of the world where hepatitis B is prevalent.
- Because of their high rate of infection, Asian Americans are 7 times more likely than whites to die from hepatitis B-related liver disease.
- For some Asian populations, particularly men, liver cancer is one of the two leading causes of cancer-related deaths.
- Because hepatitis B can be a "silent" disease that doesn't cause symptoms for years, people who have it often don't even know they're infected. Others who are infected — and sometimes even the physicians who care for them — don't realize how serious it can be.

Dr. Sam So, a liver cancer specialist and founder of the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University, describes his work to raise awareness among Asian Americans about hepatitis B.

One of our major efforts is to raise awareness about hepatitis B in the Asian American community, where there's a heavy burden of disease. Even though as many as 1 in 10 in the Asian American community could be living with this infection, many of them actually don't know much about it. They don't know how it is transmitted, they didn't know there's a vaccine which

could prevent it, and they didn't know there are treatments that could minimize the risk of them developing complications like liver cancer and liver disease.

So in an effort to educate the public, we actually launched a campaign in 2001. It's called the Jade Ribbon Campaign. The message of the Jade Ribbon Campaign is very simple: Be tested for hepatitis B with a simple blood test called hepatitis B surface antigen. If you are not protected, vaccination could potentially protect you for life. If you are infected, be treated and be screened regularly for liver cancer so that, even if you develop liver cancer, it can be detected early and be successfully treated.

Week after week, I see patients coming to see me in my liver cancer clinic with advanced liver cancer because they were never aware that they needed to be tested for hepatitis B. One case which really came to my mind is a doctor, himself. A young internist, practicing in San Francisco who was not aware that, if you have chronic hepatitis B, you need to be screened regularly for liver cancer. Unfortunately for him, he found out too late when he was diagnosed with advanced liver cancer at (the) age of 31. So, he actually became a spokesperson for the Jade Ribbon Campaign before he died, because he knew that most of the doctors he worked with was not aware of the need for screening Asian American patients for hepatitis B.

As Dr. So indicated, testing is the first step toward ensuring that people with chronic hepatitis B are identified and referred for care. CDC recommends that all people born in countries with high rates of hepatitis B be tested. If you're Asian American, ask your healthcare provider about whether you, your family members, or your sexual partners need to be tested or vaccinated. If you have hepatitis B, you should be evaluated regularly to see if liver disease is progressing and to determine whether you would benefit from available therapies. If you're not infected, but are at risk, you should be vaccinated against hepatitis B.

For more information about hepatitis B, please visit the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis. More information about the Asian Liver Center is available at liver.stanford.edu.

Thank you.

For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.