



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Looking Out for Your Liver

World Hepatitis Day — July 28, 2011

Recorded: July 19, 2011; posted: July 21, 2011

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC — safer, healthier people.

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the *MMWR*, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

Viral hepatitis is a group of viral infections that affects more than 500 million people worldwide. It causes inflammation of the liver and can lead to liver failure or liver cancer.

Dr. John Ward is Director of CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis. He's joining us today to discuss ways to prevent this disease and the importance of early detection and treatment. Welcome to the show, John.

[Dr. Ward] Nice to be here, Bob. Thank you.

[Dr. Gaynes] John, what are the main differences in the various forms of viral hepatitis?

[Dr. Ward] There are three forms of hepatitis in the United States. Hepatitis A is spread through poor hygiene, either through direct person-to-person contact or in foodborne outbreaks. Hepatitis B and C can be spread through sexual contact, through blood exposures, and particularly for hepatitis B, through mother-to-child transmission.

[Dr. Gaynes] What are the symptoms of hepatitis?

[Dr. Ward] The symptoms of hepatitis can be far ranging, from mild symptoms of tiredness, or fatigue, progressing toward yellow skin, known as jaundice, along with yellow whites of the eyes, progressing to even more feelings of distress representing liver failure, and progressing on, unfortunately, to death in a number of those cases. In addition though, many infections can be completely silent and people are unaware of their infections and so they can unknowingly transmit the infection to others at the time of when they're infected, but in the case of B and C, they can persist as silent infections, without symptoms, for decades, representing opportunities for continued transmission, unknowingly, from that person, and for that person to have progressive liver disease that they are not aware of until they become so ill that they have to have a liver transplant or, unfortunately, die of that infection decades after they became infected.

[Dr. Gaynes] John, are there vaccines for hepatitis?

[Dr. Ward] Fortunately, there are safe and highly effective vaccines for two forms of hepatitis in the United States – hepatitis A and hepatitis B. All infants in the United States are recommended to receive both of these vaccines as part of the childhood immunization schedule, as well as

adults who are at risk for hepatitis, who may have been too old to receive those vaccines when they were introduced, but who remain at risk for hepatitis. Those populations include healthcare workers, men who have sex with men, persons who are injection drug users, and any person who seeks protection from hepatitis A and B should be able to receive this vaccine from a health care provider.

[Dr. Gaynes] Besides vaccination, what are some other ways to prevent hepatitis?

[Dr. Ward] One important way to prevent hepatitis, both the infection and the disease, is screening to identify those who are infected but may be unaware of it. CDC's particularly concerned that, of the 3.5 to 5.3 million persons living with hepatitis in the United States, many, if not most, are unaware of it so they are unknowingly transmitting the infection to others or they're not getting the care they need to prevent the progression of viral hepatitis to liver scarring or cirrhosis and liver cancer. And this is particularly important now because, fortunately, over the last several years, more effective treatments have been developed and licensed for use in the United States which can delay or even reverse the liver damage of viral hepatitis, and in the case of hepatitis C, three out of four persons treated can be cleared of the virus, representing, essentially, a cure of their infection and an avoidance of liver scarring and the liver cancer that can result if they don't get treated.

[Dr. Gaynes] John, where can listeners get more information about hepatitis?

[Dr. Ward] Listeners can go to www.cdc.gov/hepatitis.

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, John. I've been talking today with CDC's Dr. John Ward about viral hepatitis, a serious disease that causes inflammation of the liver and can lead to liver failure or liver cancer.

People may be infected for decades and have few, if any, symptoms. So ask your health care provider if you need to be screened for viral hepatitis. Early detection is essential to successfully treating this serious condition and preventing transmission to others.

Until next time, be well. This is Dr. Robert Gaynes for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

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