



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 5, 2009

May is National Hepatitis Awareness Month

Free hepatitis C testing offered

May is designated as national Hepatitis Awareness Month. One in 10 Americans is affected by liver disease, including men, women, and children of every race and age group. Worldwide, one in 12 is living with either hepatitis B or hepatitis C. While this is far higher than the occurrence of HIV or any cancer, awareness is low and the majority of those infected are unaware.

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. The most common forms of viral hepatitis include hepatitis A, B, and C. Hepatitis A is one of the most common vaccine-preventable diseases reported in the United States and is spread by eating or drinking food or water contaminated with feces of an infected person. Those most at risk are children in communities with high levels of hepatitis A, travelers to high-risk geographic areas and men who have sex with men. Preventing transmission of hepatitis A is as simple using good hand washing techniques with soap and warm water, especially after using the restroom. Food service workers, childcare providers and others at high risk should receive the hepatitis A vaccine.

Hepatitis B and C are more serious. Both are blood borne diseases transmitted when blood or body fluids from an infected person enter the body of another person. The disease is most frequently transmitted through injection drug use with a shared needle or through sexual activity. Hepatitis B is very contagious and can live on environmental surfaces up to a month, at room temperature.

Both hepatitis B and C can cause chronic infection which may lead to development of cirrhosis of the liver and /or liver cancer. Some people with hepatitis C initially may not have any symptoms, and may not know they have been infected.

People in the following high-risk groups should be tested for hepatitis C:

- Anyone who has had close contact with an individual who has tested positive for hepatitis C;
- Anyone who has ever injected illegal drugs, even if it was only a few times years ago;
- Anyone who received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant before July, 1992;
- Anyone who has ever been on long-term kidney dialysis;
- Anyone with a history of drug use, has tattoos or body piercings, or has been incarcerated for 6 months or more.

While it is possible to prevent hepatitis A and B by getting vaccinated, no vaccine is available for hepatitis C. The Taney County Health Department (TCHD) offers the hepatitis A and B vaccines. Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for anyone who is employed in the food service industry. For more information or to make an appointment contact either TCHD location, Branson at (417) 334-4544 or Forsyth at (417) 546-4725.

May 19, World Hepatitis Day, TCHD will partner with the Church Army of Branson to offer free hepatitis C testing. The screenings will be offered at Church Army located at 611 South Sixth Street, Branson from 2:30 pm to 4:30 pm, no appointments are required.

Awareness is the first step in protecting yourself against hepatitis. For more information about hepatitis, risk factors, prevention, and treatment, visit our website at www.taneycohealth.org or call (417) 334-4544 or (417) 546-4725.