

A world of trouble from one chronic illness

Written by By NM Dept. of Health
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Hepatitis is one of those silent illnesses we talk about often in public health. It's estimated to be the seventh leading cause of death in the world, and yet it is one of those infections that many people living with it are not even aware they have.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report hepatitis is an infection caused by one of five viruses – hepatitis A, B, C, D or E. Every form of hepatitis can cause inflammation of the liver, but hepatitis B and C often leads to cirrhosis and liver cancer.

That's why World Hepatitis Day was recognized July 28, by the World Health Organization to raise awareness and promote understanding of hepatitis.

Not all hepatitis is dangerous. Hepatitis A and hepatitis B can be prevented with safe, effective vaccine. There's no vaccine though for hepatitis C... the most common killer. There has been progress in recent years with new anti-viral medication, however that is able to reverse the effects for the estimated 80-95 percent who complete treatment.

All pregnant women in New Mexico and the United States and many other countries are now routinely screened for hepatitis. If a pregnant woman has it, doctors and other health care providers take extra steps to assure their newborn gets timely vaccination to prevent it being passed to them.

The New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) reports an estimated 23,000 to 55,000 residents are infected with hepatitis. The cause often comes from substance-use behaviors, like sharing needles... or in tattooing with a used needle.

It's tattoos that actually lead many to late life diagnoses. Tattooing was not as safe or as well-regulated among our baby boom generation, people born between 1945 through 1965. That's why the CDC recommends all baby boomers get tested for hepatitis regardless of the whether substance abuse has been an issue in their lives or not.

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In addition to Baby Boomers, testing is recommended for:

- Anyone who currently injects drugs and anyone who ever injected drugs. (even once many years ago)
- People with liver disease or abnormal liver tests.
- People with HIV infection.
- Children born to HCV-positive women.
- Anyone who was ever on long-term hemodialysis or received transfusions or organ transplants.

For information on how to get tested, talk to your primary care provider or call your local public health office.

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