Know Your Status

June 5, 2013 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

More than 3 million people are living with hepatitis C in the United States—and most of them aren't aware of their status. It can take years for symptoms to show. But even without symptoms, the virus is still doing damage to your liver. The disease is spread when blood with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) enters the body of someone who does not have it. The only way to know if you have hep C is to get tested.

More than 75 percent of adults with HCV are baby boomers, which is why the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now recommends getting tested if you were born between 1945 to 1965. That makes sense, because finding out your status is the only way you can be treated before it's too late. African Americans have a significantly higher rate of chronic hep C compared with other ethnic groups.

Some of the more common ways to contract HCV include sharing equipment for injecting drugs, getting a tattoo, experiencing a needlestick injury in a health care setting, having had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992 and being born to a mother with HCV. Sexual transmission is rare, although gay men, especially those with HIV, may be at increased risk. A simple blood test is all it takes to find out. Click here for more about the basics of hep C transmission.

Finding out if you have hep C is the first step. Once you're aware of it, you can consider your options for treatment and the best timing for treatment. Click here to read more about hep C treatment and visit hepmag.com for the latest treatment updates.

No one wants to test positive for hep C, but a diagnosis isn't the end. U.S. Representative Hank Johnson (D–Ga.) is living proof. Diagnosed with HCV in 1998, he kept his hep C status private through the years, including during his 2006 election to Congress. When asked by a reporter during his 2010 congressional reelection campaign to address rumors that he was dying, Johnson disclosed he was undergoing hep C treatment. Going through treatment isn't easy, but treatment is getting better all the time. Johnson was cured of his HCV, won another term and has become a vocal advocate for people with hepatitis. Read more about him here.

Determining the best timing for treatment for HCV is something to be discussed with your doctor. For some people, getting treatment as soon as possible is the best decision. For others, it may be OK to wait until newer therapies with shorter durations of treatment and lessened side effects are available. Everybody's experience is different—and you can read about different people's

experiences at blogs.hepmag.com. The good news is the future of hep C treatment looks promising.

Whether you decide to start treatment now or wait for more options, it’s a hopeful time for people with hepatitis. So talk with your doctor and get tested for HCV. You can be cured, but you first have to know your status.

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