All Adults Should Be Screened for Hep C

Wider screening would prevent liver cirrhosis, liver cancer and the need for liver transplants.

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The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force has issued a new recommendation that all adults ages 18 to 79 should be screened for hepatitis C virus (HCV) at least once, regardless of whether they have risk factors for the virus. Those under 18 or over 79 should also be screened if they do have such risk factors, which include having ever shared syringes or other equipment for drug injection. Individuals at ongoing risk should be tested periodically.

The task force previously recommended one-time universal HCV screening only for baby boomers—those born between 1945 and 1965—given the fact that this birth cohort has long accounted for the bulk of U.S. infections. But as the opioid epidemic has expanded in recent years, hep C rates have risen among younger individuals.

Thanks to evidence indicating that the benefits of screening and follow-up care outweigh any harms, the task force gave the new recommendation what's known as a B grade, which requires that insurers cover the tests.

The screening recommendation, the task force stresses, includes pregnant women. HCV can be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy or delivery.

Douglas K. Owens, MD, the chair of the task force and an investigator at the Center for Innovation to Implementation at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System, says he hopes the broadened testing recommendation "will help ensure more Americans with hepatitis C detect the disease early and get the treatment they need to stay healthy."

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