Fighting Hepatitis C Among African Americans

The Deputy Director of the CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention on how to improve hepatitis outcomes in the black community.

February 24, 2014 By Hazel D. Dean

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February is Black History Month, a time to commemorate the achievements of African Americans in the United States. It also presents an opportunity to discuss serious health concerns that affect the African American community, including viral hepatitis and especially Hepatitis C.

The most common type of viral hepatitis is Hepatitis C, with an estimated 3.2 million persons in the United States living with the disease. However, many are unaware of their infection since people with Hepatitis C often do not have symptoms and can live for decades without feeling sick. The longer people live undiagnosed and untreated for Hepatitis C, the more likely they are to develop serious, life-threatening liver disease.

"Viral hepatitis is not an ethnically neutral infection" because of its disparate morbidity and mortality impact among certain ethnic groups, said the National Medical Association (NMA) in their recently released peer-reviewed consensus paper entitled Hepatitis C: A Crisis in the African American Community [PDF 2.13MB].

More than 75% of those infected with Hepatitis C are baby boomers, defined as people born from 1945 through 1965. Among "boomers," rates of Hepatitis C are higher in African Americans. In fact, African American boomers are twice as likely to have Hepatitis C than other baby boomers.

According to NMA, African Americans are less responsive to many of the current pharmacologic agents used in the treatment of Hepatitis C, in part because of the virus strain that most African Americans are infected with. However, the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) recently approved treatments that can cure Hepatitis C, even among those who have failed earlier treatment.

Along with the new FDA-approved treatments and the spotlight generated by the NMA consensus document, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which includes the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has identified viral hepatitis as an important public health issue and is working to coordinate and focus the national response. Since its release in 2011, HHS has collaborated with federal and non-governmental partners to implement Combating the Silent Epidemic of Viral Hepatitis: Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis, which includes prioritized efforts to address viral hepatitis-related health disparities among African Americans and other population groups.

I encourage everyone to take a look at these documents, learn more, and find out how you can help. As well, take the CDC online risk assessment for hepatitis. It is not just for those born from 1945 through 1965 and will help determine if you should talk to your doctor about hepatitis.

Let's do all we can to stay healthy and share information to help prevent hepatitis.

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