# Hepatitis C Is Threatening Our Youth

October 23, 2017 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Hepatitis C is the most common bloodborne virus in the U.S. More people die every year from hep C than all 60 reportable infectious diseases combined, including HIV. Historically, hepatitis C virus infection (HCV) was considered a baby boomer disease; a legacy that we hoped would die with us. However, we got that wrong. Today's opioid crisis is causing a new wave of HCV infections, and is threatening our youth.

Last month, Alan Franciscus wrote about hepatitis C in children. He discussed our national failure to accurately gauge the prevalence of HCV in kids. Franciscus points out that women in their childbearing years are not exempt from the ravaging effects of substance use. In short, the number of hep C cases is rising again. However, it's a different era than when my fellow baby boomers and I were infected. When I was infected, HCV wasn't yet identified. Not only have we identified and named hepatitis C, we know how it is transmitted, how to prevent it from spreading, and how to cure it.

The Risk of HCV in Young People

The reported prevalence of hepatitis C infection in children and teens ranges from 0.05 percent to 0.36 percent in the United States. However, James Squires and William Balistreri suspect that the prevalence of hepatitis C in children and adolescents is grossly underestimated. (Hepatology Communications) The opioid crisis is causing a surge in the number of hepatitis C cases. Squires and Balistreri write, "A recent study demonstrates a 364% increase in HCV infection among people 12 to 29 years of age living in the Appalachian region of the United States. These findings show that a new wave of young individuals will require HCV-specific treatment or risk the development of progressive liver disease and its complications."

The rise in new hepatitis C infections isn't solely due to drug use. HCV is associated with other high-risk activities, including receiving tattoos in an unregulated setting, body piercing, and engaging in sexual practices that involve multiple partners and/or sexual activity with trauma. When the Twilight movies were big, nurses and public health workers saw a wave of teens practicing vampire play. Outside of medical blood transfusions, sharing blood is never a harmless activity, and I shuddered when they told me about vampire play. It sounded to me like a vampire nightmare.

For the record, hepatitis C is not limited to cities. In fact, young people in the suburbs and rural parts of the U.S. are discovering what used to be more of an urban problem. If you think that your

kids can’t be infected, you may be deluding yourself.

Empower Young People

I would not have been cured if I didn’t know that I had hepatitis C. Knowing is the most important part, because then you can do something about it. If you suspect that your teenager or adult children were exposed, talk to them about being tested.

Better yet, talk to your kids about staying safe before they are at risk for hepatitis C. Let’s face it, we don’t want to have the birds and the bees conversation, let  alone one about hepatitis C and blood and needles. However, that talk is critical because it may save your child from acquiring this virus or others. Here is what everyone needs to know:

- You may be at risk for hepatitis C if your blood comes in contact with blood that is infected with hepatitis C. Don’t get a tattoo or piercing at a party or other unprofessional setting. Skip the vampire “play” or “blood brother/sister” rituals.
- Sharing needles, syringes, and everything associated with injection drugs is a risk factor for hepatitis C transmission. Straws used for inhaling drugs may also be contaminated.
- Don’t share personal care items that may have been in contact with another person’s blood, such as razors, toothbrushes, and cuticle scissors.
- Having sexual contact with a person infected with hepatitis C is a very low risk, but it is a risk. That risk increases with the type of sex and the presence of HIV. Teaching your children about safer sex does not mean they are going to have sex. It means that when they do, they will have some information that may help them stay safer. It also means that they are more likely to talk to you about hard-to-talk-about subjects.

It’s worth noting that the hepatitis B vaccine does not protect against hepatitis C. Hep B and C are completely different viruses. If your child missed the hep B vaccine, talk to their medical provider about getting immunized.

In addition to talking to your child or children, talk to other parents of school age children. It’s never too soon to start teaching about not sharing blood. Young children can be taught to wash their hands, report cuts, avoid touching blood, and to tell an adult if blood needs to cleaned up.

Kids don’t need to be frightened by blood. Keep the conversations factual, like talking about seat belts and brushing their teeth. But don’t wait until they are teens and less open to your guidance.

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