

Testing is first step in battle against hepatitis C

Baby boomer generation urged to get screened for 'silent' liver disease

By Alyson Ward
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Debra Walters didn't know she had a virus that could destroy her liver. Then she donated blood in 1992 and got a letter from the blood bank in the mail.

"It just said, 'Thanks for donating blood. Don't ever do it again; you have hepatitis C,'" she said. "I remember standing at my front door, reading this and thinking the world had stopped."

Walters didn't have any symptoms - she didn't feel sick at all. In fact, it would be 15 years before the virus affected her liver enough to require treatment. But if Walters hadn't donated blood, she never would have imagined she had a life-threatening disease.

In the United States, about 3.2 million people have chronic hepatitis C, and about 70 percent of them don't even know they have it. That's why the government and an independent task force are now recommending a one-time screening for a huge swath of Americans - a recommendation based simply on their date of birth.

Until recently, most patients got tested for hepatitis C if they had a known risk factor, or if a routine blood test showed elevated liver enzymes. But last month, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force advised that all Americans born between 1945 and 1965 should be screened for hepatitis C. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention made the same recommendation last year.

Why? People born between those years account for about three-quarters of hepatitis C cases in the United States. Physicians hope that by screening baby boomers as a group, they can identify and treat more infected patients before it's too late.

"People ask, 'Why screen?'" said Dr. John Vierling, chief of hepatology at the Baylor College of Medicine and director of Advanced Liver Therapies at St. Luke's Health System. "And the answer is that if you have this disease, you are a candidate for treatment leading to a cure."

A blood-borne virus, hepatitis C can lead to liver failure and liver cancer. It's deadly - in fact, hepatitis C has overtaken HIV as a cause of death in the United States. Half of people with liver cancer have hepatitis C; more than one-third of the patients on the liver-transplant waiting list have it.

The chronic infection can be treated, even cured - especially with new drugs that will be available as soon as the end of the year. But too often, it just isn't caught in time.

Silence isn't golden

"This is a silent disease," Vierling said. When other body parts are inflamed, they signal that with pain, soreness and swelling. But the liver has no pain receptors, so the infection silently continues to inflame and scar the organ.

In fact, hepatitis C is usually life-threatening by the time a patient develops any symptoms at all, said Dr. Norman Sussman, an associate professor of surgery at Baylor College of Medicine and a clinical investigator for St. Luke's Advanced Liver Therapies.

By the time people with hepatitis C feel ill, Sussman said - by the time they develop fever, nausea, abdominal pain, jaundice - "they either have advanced liver failure or they present with a cancer that's frequently too big to manage."

That's why baby boomers are being urged to get tested. Waiting until you have symptoms to get screened, Sussman said, "is sort of equivalent to the smoker who says, 'When I can't breathe anymore, I'll stop smoking.' At that point, it's going to be a little late."

Its beginning

The bulk of hepatitis C infections can be traced back to injectable drug use. It also can spread through tattooing with unsanitary equipment. Before 1992, patients could get hepatitis C from blood transfusions or organ transplants. Hemodialysis patients could have picked up the virus. And, although it's less likely, it's even possible to spread hepatitis C by sharing razor blades or a straw to snort cocaine.

Baby boomers were exposed to medical treatments and transfusions before we really understood blood-borne pathogens, Vierling said. After all, hepatitis C wasn't identified until 1989, so no one knew to look out for it.

This group also is at risk because they were "young in the '70s," as Walters put it. That's when she suspects she picked up the virus. Boomers came of age in the 1960s and '70s, when drug use and other risky behavior were simply part of the culture.

There's always some hesitation when it comes to talking about risk factors, said Dr. Michael Fallon, chief of service in gastroenterology and hepatology at Memorial Hermann - The Texas Medical Center and director of the division of gastroenterology, hepatology and nutrition at University of Texas Health Medical School.

People don't get screened, he said, because they don't talk about - or even understand - the ways they could have been exposed.

"People say, 'I'm a good person - how could I have gotten this disease?'" Fallon said. But it's possible to be infected from injecting drugs just once. Or after a car accident 30 years ago, a patient might have been given some blood and not even remember it happened. By

testing an entire birth cohort, Fallon said, doctors can avoid letting patients slip through the cracks.

Last month's recommendation means the screening - a simple blood test - will be covered by Medicaid, Medicare and private insurance, Vierling said.

"People do not have to have a special appointment or go to a special clinic," he said. "They can do this anywhere within the health care system."

Time for action

Walters kept an eye on her condition for more than a decade, getting regular checks to make sure her liver was functioning properly.

"I knew one day this was going to come knocking at my door," she said. And sure enough - about seven years ago, she got abnormal test results and knew it was time to seek treatment.

Walters went through a year of treatment in 2007 that left her sick and depressed and didn't clear the virus. But in 2011, when she'd had time to regain her strength, she signed up for a clinical trial to test a new group of drugs. A year after her treatment ended, there's no sign of the virus in her system; Walters is considered cured. She has documented her experience on a personal blog, heplikeme.com.

Soon, many new hepatitis C treatments will avoid using interferon, the antiviral agent that's been "the backbone of our therapy" for decades, Fallon said. Interferon has terrible side effects, making patients (including Walters) miserably ill. But in the next few months and years, many hepatitis C patients can look forward to other, more effective treatments with far fewer drawbacks. "The therapy will fundamentally change in the next five years," Fallon said.

The first new treatments are expected to gain Food and Drug Administration approval by early 2014.

"We've just come through the dark ages and we're about to have the renaissance, " Walters said.

Before patients can receive those treatments, though, they have to be identified. For people ages 48 to 68, there's one clear message: The next time you're in a doctor's office - any doctor's office - you can request to be screened.

If you have hepatitis C, Sussman said, it's crucial to know. And now it's easier than ever to find out.

"Your choice is," Sussman said, "do you die of a disease because you denied it? Or do you take some action?"