



MEDIA RELEASE

KNOX COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Nov. 30, 2016

KCHD gets first snapshot of local Hepatitis C rates

Urges those at risk to get tested, know status

Knoxville, Tenn. – Having incorporated hepatitis C screening into most of its preventive clinical offerings, the Knox County Health Department (KCHD) has tested more than 3,000 patients since June 1, 2016, and discovered a 10 percent infection rate among those tested.

“To effectively address hepatitis C in our community, we must have a better understanding of the scope of this epidemic locally,” said KCHD Clinical Services Director Dr. Kelly Cooper. “Compared to the rest of the country, the highest rates of hepatitis C are estimated to be in Appalachia. And, this is exactly what this preliminary data for Knox County is showing us.”

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by a blood-borne virus. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States. The CDC estimates three million people are living with the virus and that three in four of those infected are not aware of their infection and, therefore, are not receiving preventive services or treatment. While the majority of those infected nationally are baby boomers, the latest increase in cases has been linked with IV drug use. In fact, Tennessee’s rate of acute hepatitis C has more than tripled since 2009. Chronic hepatitis C, alternatively, is not currently a reportable disease, and therefore not comprehensively tracked.

To complicate tracking further, many of those who become infected do not have symptoms or only experience mild symptoms that may not prompt a visit to a health care provider. When symptoms do occur they can include fever, fatigue, abdominal pain, vomiting, clay-colored stool and dark urine. For some, hepatitis C infection results in a mild, acute illness that lasts just a few weeks; however, 70 to 85 percent of those infected develop a long-term chronic infection. Without treatment, chronic hepatitis C infection can lead to serious liver problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer.

“Many of those who have hepatitis C do not know they are infected, so testing is critical because knowing your status can help protect your health and reduce transmission to others,” added Cooper. “We urge testing for those who were born between 1945 and 1965, as well as anyone who engages in IV or intranasal drug use, or has at some point in the past,” added Cooper.

Testing is also recommended for those who were treated for a blood clotting problem before 1987, those who received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before July 1992, those who are on long-term hemodialysis treatment, those who are infected with HIV, and those who have abnormal liver tests or liver disease.



Hepatitis C testing is available at private health care providers and at all three KCHD locations:

Downtown Main Office and Clinic 140 Dameron Ave. 865-215-5370	West Knoxville West Clinic 1028 Old Cedar Bluff Rd. 865-215-5950	North Knoxville Teague Clinic 405 Dante Rd. 865-215-5500
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At KCHD, testing is free to the patient but will be billed to insurance if the patient has insurance.

While there are vaccines for hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C. Efforts to avoid exposure to infected blood are paramount in preventing transmission. Today, most people become infected by sharing needles, syringes or other equipment used to inject drugs. Hepatitis C can also be transmitted to an infant at birth if the mother is infected; by sharing personal care items that may have come in contact with another person's blood, such as razors or toothbrushes; and by sexual contact.

Current treatments are highly effective although they can be expensive. In addition to screening and education, KCHD's hepatitis C program works to identify and connect patients with treatment options. KCHD received grants from the Tennessee Department of Health and Gilead Pharmaceuticals to initiate testing.

About Knox County Health Department:

The Knox County Health Department (KCHD) is a governmental agency dedicated to making every person a healthy person. As the first health department in Tennessee to achieve national accreditation by the Public Health Accreditation Board, KCHD's mission is to encourage, promote and assure the development of an active, healthy community through innovative public health practices. The organization conducts disease surveillance, prevention and control; emergency preparedness; nutrition and physical activity promotion; tobacco use prevention; health equity promotion; immunizations; and much more. For more information, visit www.knoxcounty.org/health.

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