

NEWS RELEASE

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North Dakota Observes National Viral Hepatitis Testing Day

BISMARCK, N.D. –The North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) raises awareness about viral hepatitis in North Dakota by observing May as National Hepatitis Awareness Month and May 19 as National Hepatitis Testing Day. These observances provide opportunities to promote interventions to prevent viral hepatitis, from childhood and adult immunization to safer injection practices among persons who inject drugs.

“We encourage all to be tested for viral hepatitis. In North Dakota, hepatitis C continues to be a major health problem for many young individuals,” said Sarah Weninger, Viral Hepatitis Prevention Coordinator. “The rate of hepatitis C among young (15 – 34 years) individuals has increased about 40 percent over the past five years.”

There are four facts everyone should know about viral hepatitis:

- 1. Hepatitis A, B and C are all different diseases.**
Each type of viral hepatitis is caused by a different virus and spreads in different ways. Hepatitis A does not cause a long-term infection, although it can make people very sick. Hepatitis B and hepatitis C can become chronic, life-long infections and lead to serious health problems.
- 2. Chronic hepatitis is a leading cause of liver cancer.**
Chronic hepatitis B and C can cause serious damage to the liver, including liver damage, cirrhosis and even liver cancer. In fact, more than 60 percent of liver cancer cases are related to hepatitis B or C.
- 3. Most people with chronic hepatitis do not know they are infected.**
More than four million Americans are living with chronic hepatitis in the United States, but most do not know they are infected. Many people live with chronic hepatitis for decades without symptoms or feeling sick.

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4. Getting tested could save your life.

Lifesaving treatments are available for chronic hepatitis B, and new treatments are available that can cure hepatitis C. Getting tested is the only way to know if you are infected. Take the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Hepatitis Risk Assessment to see if you should be tested for viral hepatitis.

(<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/riskassessment/>)

According to the CDC, increases of hepatitis C incidence are most likely the result of increases in transmission among people who inject drugs. Comprehensive approaches are needed to combat the dual epidemics of opioid addiction and injection-related infectious diseases. Comprehensive syringe services programs (SSPs) are one of many tools that communities can use to prevent hepatitis and other injection-related infectious diseases. With the passage of Senate Bill 2320 during this year's legislative session, local agencies in North Dakota will soon be able to operate SSPs. In addition to providing sterile injecting equipment, SSPs will help link people to treatment to stop drug use, provide testing for infectious diseases that can be spread to others and help people who inject drugs gain access to other medical care.

In addition to current and former injection drug users, individuals born between 1945 and 1965 should be tested for hepatitis C. Baby boomers are five times more likely to be infected with hepatitis C than the general population. Other individuals who should be tested for hepatitis C include those who received donated blood or organs before 1992, those on hemodialysis and those born to a mother with hepatitis C.

There are many sites across North Dakota where individuals at risk for hepatitis C can get tested for no charge. A list of those sites is available at www.ndhealth.gov/Disease/Hepatitis/Tested/default.aspx.

For more information, call the North Dakota Department of Health's Viral Hepatitis Program at 701.328.2378 or 800.472.2180 or visit www.ndhealth.gov/disease/hepatitis.

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