



July 19, 2016

There is a Cure For Hepatitis C!

July 25th is the 4th Annual National African American Hepatitis C Action Day. This day promotes the importance of getting tested for Hepatitis C, which is even more important now that there are new and powerful medications that can cure Hepatitis C with few side effects.

What is Hepatitis C, and why should we care about it? Hepatitis C, or Hep C, is a virus that infects the liver and can lead to cirrhosis or even liver cancer. A person can be infected for many years before Hep C causes irreversible damage. Some people's immune system can get rid of Hep C by themselves, but others do not get rid of this virus, so these people can develop serious disease that can progress rapidly to death. Ten years ago, the age adjusted death rate from Hep C actually passed the death rate from HIV, so now more people die of Hep C than HIV. There are an estimated 180 million people in the world infected with Hep C, and about 3.5 million Americans are currently living with Hep C, with roughly half unaware of their infection. There are an estimated 27,500 infected with Hep C in Chicago, and 52% of those are African American.

How do you get Hep C, and who is at risk? Persons who received blood transfusions before 1992 – when the blood supply could be tested for Hep C – are at risk for Hep C. Also at risk are those who received home tattoos or who shot drugs through the vein or snorted drugs through the nose, even just one time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta also recommends that everyone born during the birth years 1945 through 1965 be tested for Hep C at least once, even if they have no risk factors.

Why are we hearing more about Hep C now? The simple answer is that new medications are now available. These new medications are extremely effective and can achieve cure rates of 95-99% in people taking the new oral medications. Unlike previous treatments for Hep C, which were less powerful and had many side effects, the new medications have very few side effects and are very well tolerated. In addition, many of the newer medications only need to be taken for about 3 months to achieve a cure.

Not everyone with Hep C will be eligible to take the newer medications – it depends on the stage of the disease. But everyone at risk and everyone born between 1945 and 1965 should get a simple blood test from their doctor or medical provider to see if they have Hep C in their body. Getting tested and getting treatment, if indicated, might be life-saving. Let's celebrate these scientific advances and get tested during National African American Hepatitis C Action Day!

Sincerely,

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District