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Department of Health Urges New Yorkers to Get Immunized and Get Tested During Hepatitis Awareness Month in May

Brewster – Did you know that 500 million worldwide – one in 12, are infected with Hepatitis B or C?

The Putnam County Department of Health encourages residents to ask themselves this question during Hepatitis Awareness Month in May. The goal in New York State is to drastically reduce and eventually eliminate all cases of hepatitis in newborns, children and adults.

New York's Hepatitis Awareness Month is an extension of World Hepatitis Day on May 19, an international patient-led initiative observed by 60 countries to educate the public about this life-threatening group of viruses.

Viral hepatitis refers to three very different viruses that can harm the liver, hepatitis A, B and C. Vaccines can prevent infection from hepatitis A and B; however, there is no such vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. If left untreated, viral hepatitis can damage the liver, leading to liver cancer or even death.

An estimated three out of every 10 Americans have been infected at some point in their lives with hepatitis A, the most common type of hepatitis reported in the U.S. Hepatitis A is spread when someone consumes a food or beverage that has been contaminated with the stool of a person who has the virus.

Approximately 900,000 New Yorkers are infected with hepatitis B, the most common serious liver infection in the world. It is spread through contact with blood and body fluids of an infected person, which can occur through blood-to-blood contact, sex, sharing needles during injection drug use, exposure to needle sticks on the job, and from an infected mother to her infant during childbirth.

Many individuals with chronic hepatitis C are unaware that they are infected because the disease is often asymptomatic until advanced liver damage develops. For that reason, it's often called a silent epidemic. Hepatitis C is spread primarily by exposure to human blood. Injecting street drugs, unprotected

sex, and even receiving a blood transfusion may put you at risk of contracting the hepatitis C virus. People should get a blood test, and talk with their doctors. An estimated 300,000 New Yorkers have been infected with hepatitis C, of which nearly 80 percent have chronic infections. About 70 percent of persons chronically infected with hepatitis C develop liver disease, sometimes decades after the initial infection.

Being immunized is the first step in prevention. All children should be given hepatitis vaccines, starting with hepatitis B vaccine at birth and hepatitis A vaccine at 1 year. Any older child or adult who has not been vaccinated may also get hepatitis vaccines. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C, so avoiding risky behaviors is extremely important. Anyone who thinks they might have put themselves at risk for hepatitis should get a blood test.

Additional information and updates on this topic can be found on the New York State Department of Health's website: <http://www.nyhealth.gov/hepatitis/>.

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