HEPATITIS B: Know Your Status, Know Your Facts

“People who are infected with hepatitis B usually don’t know that they are infected.”
- says Dr. Wexler

By Elizabeth Thao

Hepatitis B (HBV) is substantial in the U.S. due to waves of immigration from Asia, Africa, and other areas of the world. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over one million people in the U.S. are infected with the disease and a high percentage of them are people from Asian communities, the Himong included. This is mainly due to the fact that foreign-born communities often have not had vaccinations for HBV, unlike the U.S. which recommends that all babies, children, and teenagers be vaccinated. Also unlike the U.S., foreign-born communities often already had the disease for so many generations and with so many people infected, the disease is difficult to eliminate.

Dr. Deborah Wexler, Executive Director of the Immunization Action Coalition in St. Paul, MN, advises people who might be at risk for hepatitis B to get tested right away. Unfortunately, because there are usually no symptoms of Hepatitis B until it has moved into advanced stages in which the virus causes severe liver damage, serious and chronic cases of the disease can lead to the destruction of the liver, cirrhosis (scarring), and liver cancer. "People who are infected with hepatitis B usually don't know that they are infected," says Dr. Wexler, "they don’t come in until it’s too late."

Luckily though, hepatitis B is preventable and there are medicines that can help treat people who are already infected. There has been a vaccine for HBV for over 20 years, and although there is no way to cure HBV, a simple daily regimen of medicine in addition to check-ups every 6 months, can make the disease very controllable.

KNOW YOUR STATUS and ACT ON IT

If you, your parents, or your children were born in Asia or the Pacific Islands, Africa, the Middle East, or the South American Basin, you are more likely to have HBV infection, so if you are from any of these areas of the world, you should get tested. (For a complete list of counties of high level infection, a brochure is available at http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4170.pdf.)

- If you are susceptible (you have not ever had the disease), you will need to be vaccinated with 3 shots.
- If you are immune (you have had the disease in the past it has gone away, or you have had your 3 shots), you don’t need to do anything further. You are not in danger of getting infected if or of passing the disease on to anyone.
- If you are a carrier of hepatitis B (this means you have the hepatitis B virus circulating in your blood), you will need to see a doctor in order to regularly receive check-ups and liver ultrasounds to monitor whether or not the disease is causing any damage to your body. Most hepatitis B carriers feel fine and show no symptoms at all but the virus can be causing damage, and can still be spread to others.

You must have blood tests to find out if you have hepatitis B. If it turns out that you are infected with hepatitis B, you will need additional blood tests to find out if your liver is being injured. Liver disease caused by hepatitis B can lead to liver failure or liver cancer. Be sure to be prepared when you visit your doctor: tell your doctor if anyone in your family is infected with hepatitis B, bring in your vaccination records if you have them, and bring any records of hepatitis B blood tests you’ve had in the past. Don’t worry if you don’t have this information. It’s important to get to your doctor’s office even if you can’t provide this information.

“Be sure to get the proper tests done,” adds Dr. Wexler, “in general you need three different hepatitis B blood tests to determine your status— these test results can be difficult to interpret and even doctors can sometimes interpret them incorrectly. Make sure you get a copy of your test results and be sure you understand what they mean. Know your status, know your test results.” A good place to understand what your blood tests mean can be found at http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p2110.pdf.

HOW CAN THE DISEASE BE SPREAD?

If you are a carrier, HBV can be spread from you to another person by exchange of certain body fluids, including blood, semen, and sex secretions. Hepatitis B is much easier to spread than other sexually transmitted viruses like HIV, as it can exist outside the body and on surfaces for up to 7 days.

Some examples of how the disease can be spread are:
- An infected mother to her child during birth
- Having sex with an infected person without using a condom
- Coming in contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- Being bitten by an HBV-infected person
- Sharing a household with a person who has chronic HBV infection
- Sharing items such as razors, toothbrushes, washcloths, or other personal care items
- Pre-chewing food for babies
- Sharing chewing gum
- Sharing syringes, needles, drugs, cotton, spoons, or water to inject drugs
- Using unsterilized needles in ear or body piercing, tattooing, or acupuncture
- Using needles that have been used on someone else

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6
• Coughing or sneezing
• Any other casual contact

There have been many efforts to raise awareness of this disease, particularly in the Asian and Asian-American communities. Because the impact of the disease has been so prevalent in the community, initiatives have promoted more government funding for HBV prevention and care, educational campaigns, and public service announcements in order to raise awareness of what has been called a silent killer in the Asian community.

There are also online pamphlets and information that have been translated into various different languages which can be found at http://liver.stanford.edu/Public/brochures.html.

But despite the prevalence of the disease in Asians, it is important to know that anyone can contract this disease. Be sure you know if people in your family

GOT NEWS?
Call Hmong Pages - Cheu Lee @
651-775-0503
or E-mail: qpcheu@hotmail.com

Lee's Tax Services
"Year Round Tax & Payroll Services"

Cheu Lee
Tax Consultant

383 University Ave. W
Saint Paul, MN 55103
Bus: 651-221-0199
Cell: 651-775-0503
Fax: 651-209-6900