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*** FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ***

State Health Officials Urge Those At Risk to be Tested for Hepatitis C

CHEYENNE - The Staff Physician for the Wyoming Department of Health today urged people at risk to have a blood test for hepatitis C.

Dr. Gary Melinkovich said that since 1995, over 3,000 people in Wyoming have been diagnosed with hepatitis C - and many of these people were unknowingly infected years ago. Hepatitis C is generally spread through contact with contaminated blood and, to a much lesser extent, sexual contact with an infected person.

He said that people who received blood transfusion or an organ transplant before 1992, received clotting factors before 1987, or ever injected illicit drugs - even just one time - should know their hepatitis C status and consult with their healthcare provider to be tested. Testing is also available in most local public health offices.

"Early diagnosis is very important with this disease," Melinkovich said. "Eighty percent of those who become infected with hepatitis C show no initial signs and symptoms so they often don't know they are infected. Many continue on, unaware, until they develop problems 15 to 30 years later."

Those problems may include liver damage such as cirrhosis, cancer, or liver failure.

Nationally, an estimated 3.9 million Americans have been exposed to hepatitis C, and an estimated 2.7 million are chronically infected. In fact, chronic hepatitis C infection is now the leading cause of the need for liver transplantation. Hepatitis C is four times more common than HIV.

Many of the chronic hepatitis C cases seen in the state are the result of a blood transfusion prior to 1992. However, Clay Van Houten, the Hepatitis Prevention Coordinator for the Wyoming Department of Health, said that indications are that most new infections are the result of injection drug use. Consequently, as methamphetamine use (and specifically its injection) increases in Wyoming more people are likely to be exposed to hepatitis C.

Van Houten said that 22 percent of injection drug users tested for hepatitis C at Wyoming public health offices were positive in 2004.

"This is much lower than the rate seen in studies in large urban areas where as many as 90 percent of injection drug users have hepatitis C," he said. "But as access to new syringes becomes increasingly difficult, those numbers may rise in Wyoming. Injection drug users need to use a clean new syringe every time they inject and need to use all of their own injection equipment. There is no vaccine for this disease so it is important for those who are at risk of infection to get tested and take the necessary steps to reduce their risk for infection."

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Hepatitis C Fact Sheet:

Ask your doctor for a blood test for hepatitis C if:

You ever injected street drugs, even if you experimented a few times many years ago,

You were treated for clotting problems with a blood product made before 1987,
You received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant (e.g., kidney, liver, heart) before July 1992,
You were ever on long-term kidney dialysis.

Why should I be tested for hepatitis C?

Early diagnosis is important so you can:
Be checked for liver disease,
Get treatment, if indicated,
Learn how you can protect your liver from further harm,
Learn how you can prevent spreading hepatitis C to others.

Hepatitis C can be spread by:

Unprotected sex with multiple partners,
Needle and 'works' sharing,
Sharing toothbrushes, razors (anything that may have blood on it) with an infected person,
An infected mother to child during birth.

Hepatitis C is not spread by:

Breast-feeding,
Hugging,
Kissing,
Food or water,
Casual contact,
Sneezing,
Coughing,
Sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses.

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