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HEPATITIS CLINIC ESTABLISHED TO HELP IN STATE WITH HIGHEST RATES OF HEPATITIS B AND C

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In 2016, 267 cases of acute Hepatitis B were identified in the state of West Virginia, only five fewer cases than in 2015, which saw 272 cases.

What’s more, West Virginia has consecutively reported the highest incidence of acute Hepatitis B in the United States from 2007-2015, at 14 times the national average.

The state also reports the highest incident rate for acute Hepatitis C, with 131 cases in 2016, 7.1 cases per 100,000 residents. West Virginia’s rate has increased significantly since 2010, fueled at least in part by the opioid crisis that has hit the state hard. The number of 2017 cases has not yet been tallied or released by the state.

These sobering facts, collected last year by the West Virginia Department of Health & Human Resources’ Bureau for Public Health, emphasize the need for Monongalia County Health Department’s Hepatitis Clinic, held from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Fridays.

“We have a high number of actual cases, but the incidence, that is, the number of cases based on our population, is also the highest,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, county health officer, and executive director of Monongalia County Health Department (monchd.org).

The good news about Hepatitis B is that there is a vaccine series that can prevent Hepatitis B infection, and it is available at MCHD Clinical Services by appointment by calling 304-598-5119. The list of adults who should get the Hepatitis B vaccines, according to Center for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov), includes health care workers, public safety workers, men who have unprotected sex with other men, drug users who share needles, people who have a household contact with someone who has Hepatitis B, residents and staff of homes with
developmentally disabled people, prisoners at correctional facilities and victims of sexual assault or abuse.

Another bright spot in the fight against Hepatitis B is that these vaccines are routinely administered as part of a baby’s immunization schedule with three doses given between birth through 18 months. “Children younger than 19 years of age who haven’t gotten Hepatitis B should be vaccinated,” Smith said. “We’re trying to build herd immunity and prevent deaths and complications.”

However, there is some bad news along with the good. Even though there is a vaccine for Hepatitis B, there is no cure. The reverse is true for Hepatitis C: Right now, there is no vaccine but there is a cure. However, it’s important to be tested early for Hepatitis C to receive treatment as soon as possible and prevent complications.

Those who should be tested for Hepatitis C include: Baby Boomers born between 1945 and 1965; people who have injected illegal drugs, even if it was just once many years ago; recipients of clotting factor concentrates made before 1987; recipients of blood transfusions or solid organ transplants before July 1992; patients who have ever received long-term hemodialysis treatment; people with known exposure to Hepatitis C; all people with HIV; patients with signs or symptoms of liver disease; and children born to mothers with Hepatitis C.

MCHD Clinical Services’ Hepatitis Clinic is led Susan R. McKenrick, MSN, APRN, FNP-BC and Kendra L. Barker, DNP, CDE, ADM. McKenrick and Barker can help patients with referrals for other services and with navigating insurance or drug companies to finance treatment, which can be expensive. A 12-week course of Harvoni, which treats Hepatitis C, may run as high as $94,500 without funding assistance.

Although Hepatitis B is not currently curable, McKenrick and Barker can help treat patients and manage their symptoms. People who are interested in attending the Hepatitis Clinic do not need a referral from a doctor, but they do need to make an appointment. Initial diagnosing testing is free. Additional testing may have a cost and can be covered with insurance or on a sliding fee scale basis for those without insurance.

Both Hepatitis B and C can be acute, short-term illnesses or they can turn into chronic diseases that cause cirrhosis of the liver and Hepatitis C is associated with liver cancer.

“We know that we get the best success rates when patients get treatment early,” Smith said. “Waiting until the disease is in an advanced stage does not have such a great success rate.”

To make an appointment for the MCHD Hepatitis Clinic, call 304-598-5119.