New Jersey Must Act to Stop the Silent Killer Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that can destroy people’s health and lives. Liver disease, liver cancer and deaths from hepatitis C are on the rise in New Jersey and across the country. Between 3 and 4 million people in the United States have hepatitis C. More than 150,000 people are infected in New Jersey alone.

Because hepatitis C often has no symptoms, people can go for decades without discovering they have it. Since most people who are infected with hepatitis C don’t know it, the disease often progresses untreated and can cause liver damage, cirrhosis, liver cancer, and even death. More people now die from hepatitis C than from HIV/AIDS in the United States and the CDC predicts that deaths due to hepatitis C will will double or triple in the next twenty years. These deaths are preventable.

An Important Way to Fight this Silent and Deadly Epidemic is to Expand Hepatitis C Testing

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that anyone born between 1945 and 1965 get tested for hepatitis C. Three quarters of the people with hepatitis C are in this age group. African Americans and veterans in this age group have substantially higher rates of hepatitis C infection.

Knowing your hepatitis C status will prevent transmitting the disease to others. Hepatitis C is spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person. Infection can be transmitted by sharing needles and other drug injection equipment, needle stick injuries in health care settings or otherwise coming into contact with the blood of an infected person. Before there was widespread screening, hepatitis C was also spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants.

The vast majority of people with hepatitis C don’t know it and are therefore at greatly increased risk for liver damage, liver cancer and death. Early diagnosis can improve health outcomes and prevent the more serious consequences of a hepatitis C infection. Most people with hepatitis C can now be cured.

New Jersey Must Enact Legislation to Implement the CDC’s Recommendations and Expand Testing for Those at Greatest Risk for Infection

Senate Bill 483/Assembly Bill 3831 would require that hospitals and health care professionals offer hepatitis C testing to individuals born between 1945 and 1965. New York recently enacted similar legislation in an effort to fight this silent and deadly epidemic. People born between 1945 and 1965 are five times more likely to be infected with hepatitis C than people in other age groups. Offering testing to this group will focus the fight on those who are at greatest risk. The bill will also expand rapid hepatitis C testing making it easier and faster for people to be tested and get their test results.

Expanded Testing for Hepatitis C for Those at Highest Risk Will Save Lives, Prevent Serious Health Consequences and Reduce Medical Costs

According to the CDC, if everyone born between 1945 and 1965 were tested for hepatitis C, more than 800,000 cases would be identified and more than 100,000 lives could be saved. Expanded testing would identify hepatitis C infections earlier, preventing the more serious consequences that occur when the infection progresses. Options for treatment are advancing rapidly. New drugs with fewer side effects and greater cure rates are becoming available. Expanded testing will maximize the benefits of these medical advances and help thousands live longer and healthier lives.