



News from the Office of
ERIE COUNTY EXECUTIVE MARK POLONCARZ

NEWS RELEASE

Commissioner of Health Dr. Gale Burstein

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BURSTEIN URGES HEPATITIS TESTING, AWARENESS OF 'SILENT EPIDEMIC'

May is Hepatitis Awareness Month; First-ever Hepatitis Testing Day is May 19th

ERIE COUNTY, NY— Erie County Commissioner of Health Dr. Gale Burstein today addressed the spread of viral hepatitis, a “silent epidemic.” There are more than 4 million people in the United States who are living with chronic Hepatitis B or chronic Hepatitis C, a life-long infection which can lead to liver cancer. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), up to 75% of those infected are unaware of their condition.

“Over the past five years, Erie County has consistently identified a substantial number of Hepatitis C cases annually. Since 2007, Erie County identified 3,095 new cases of Hepatitis C. We are very concerned that many newly diagnosed people are young people, i.e. in their late teens and 20’s,” **said Burstein.** “Symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C can take up to 30 years to develop, so many people with chronic Hepatitis C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected unless they are tested. With early detection, many people can get lifesaving care and treatment that can limit disease progression and prevent cancer deaths.”

Throughout May, the CDC is reaching out to its public health partners through a national health initiative called “Know More Hepatitis”, with a goal of raising awareness of viral hepatitis while encouraging testing for those who may be chronically infected. Additionally, May 19th will be recognized as the first-ever Hepatitis Testing Day in the United States, which the CDC will use as an opportunity to remind health care providers and the public about the importance of hepatitis testing. Since chronic hepatitis often does not cause any symptoms until serious liver damage has been done, testing is crucial.

Hepatitis B can be spread through unprotected sex as well as through the use of unclean needles, which can include tattoos and piercings. Hepatitis B can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby at birth. Risk factors associated with Hepatitis C infection are: injection of illegal drugs or sharing of drug paraphernalia (even if you only injected once or a few times many years ago); received a blood transfusion, blood products or organ donations before June 1992; or received clotting factors made before 1997. In Erie County, free hepatitis testing is offered to anyone who comes to the County’s STD clinic through a program funded by the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH); the County also offers free Hepatitis A and B vaccine for all patients who come to the clinic.

“Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B can both be prevented with vaccines,” **Burstein continued.** “The Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for all children at one year of age and for adults who may be at increased risk. The Hepatitis B vaccine is now recommended for all infants at birth and for adults who may be at increased risk. People who may not be immunized should understand their risks.”

The CDC has developed an online Hepatitis Risk Assessment to determine a person’s hepatitis testing and vaccination recommendations. The 5-minute, online tool allows individuals to answer questions privately, either in their home or a health care setting, and then print tailored recommendations based on CDC’s guidelines to discuss with their doctor.

For more information:

On Erie County’s STD clinic visit: <http://www2.erie.gov/health/index.php?q=sexually-transmitted-disease-clinics>

On Hepatitis Awareness Month visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HepAwarenessMonth.htm>

On Hepatitis Testing Day visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/Hepatitis/TestingDay/>

On the Hepatitis Risk Assessment Tool visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/HEPATITIS/riskassessment/>

On the “Know More Hepatitis” educational campaign visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/knowmorehepatitis/>

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