



Contact Information:
Diana Olson
301-656-0003 x140
dolson@nfid.org

New National Foundation for Infectious Diseases Initiative Delivers Critical Messages About Preventing Hepatitis B Infection

Bethesda, MD (November 2, 2018) – The National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) announced the launch of a new initiative to reduce hepatitis B infections in the United States by increasing hepatitis B vaccination rates in at-risk adults. Hepatitis B is a leading cause of liver cirrhosis and liver cancer. Nearly 30 years after the US adopted a public health strategy aimed at eliminating transmission of hepatitis B virus, adult immunization rates remain stagnant at 25 percent and new infections appear to be on the rise.

“Hepatitis B is an insidious virus. It can live silently inside us for decades, but all the while it is attacking the liver,” says William Schaffner, MD, NFID Medical Director. “It is only when serious damage is done that symptoms start and by then it can be very hard and often impossible to offer any meaningful treatment.” The solution, according to the multidisciplinary group of experts who helped shape the initiative, is more widespread vaccination among at-risk US adults. Hepatitis B vaccines are safe and effective in preventing infection.

The NFID hepatitis B awareness initiative, which educates healthcare professionals and consumers about the burden of hepatitis B and the importance of prevention, is supported by more than 20 organizations representing hepatitis experts, policy makers, healthcare professionals, and consumer health advocates concerned with reducing the impact of hepatitis B in the US. The group recognized the challenge of implementing hepatitis B vaccine recommendations, which are risk based and not age based.

There are more than a dozen different risk factors that move adults into the “recommended for vaccination” category. “In broad terms, the risks center around sexual exposure and exposure to contaminated blood,” according to Amra Resic, MD, a family medicine physician in Palm Harbor, FL and a representative of the American Academy of Family Physicians. “I can tell you from my own experience, that there is stigma involved with this disease. Patients may not want to admit to risk behaviors.” Resic urges primary care providers to be proactive in discussing all vaccinations with their patients.

But even when the risk factor is less stigmatized, hepatitis B vaccination rates remain low. For example, only 26 percent of adults with diabetes between the ages of 19 and 59 years get vaccinated as recommended. These suboptimal rates show that stigma is not the only barrier to vaccination; there are also practical issues of vaccine ordering, storage, and reimbursement for the two- or three-dose vaccine series, depending on which vaccine is used.

“The NFID hepatitis B resources were developed to help healthcare professionals better understand the recommendations and incorporate them into their practice,” says Schaffner.

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A [Call to Action](#) based on the Roundtable discussions was released in late October. In addition to the Call to Action, complimentary toolkit resources are available at www.nfid.org/hepatitis-b-toolkit and include the following:

- [Preventing Hepatitis B Infections in US Adults](#) (archived 1-hour webinar offering CME and CPE)
- [Hepatitis B: Are You At Risk?](#) (infographic)
- [How Improved Hepatitis B Vaccination Coverage Can Protect At-Risk Adults](#) (ReachMD 30-minute expert interview offering CME)
- [Preventing Hepatitis B in US Adults through Vaccination](#) (peer-reviewed CME journal article published in *Infectious Diseases in Clinical Practice*).

About Hepatitis B

Up to 2.2 million US adults are living with chronic hepatitis B infection. Up to 40 percent of people who are chronically infected will get liver cirrhosis, liver failure, or live cancer. Two-thirds of people with chronic infection do not know they have it, but they can still pass the virus on to others. The hepatitis B virus is 50 to 100 times more infectious than HIV and can live outside the body for seven or more days and still be able to cause infection.

In 2016, there were an estimated 21,000 new hepatitis B infections in the US. After years of declining rates of new infections, the US is experiencing an increase in cases related to injection drug use stemming from the opioid epidemic and low immunization rates among adults. Universal vaccination recommendations for US children have led to high immunization rates in this group.

About NFID

Founded in 1973, NFID is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to educating the public and healthcare professionals about the burden, causes, prevention, and treatment of infectious diseases across the lifespan. Visit www.nfid.org for more information.

The following organizations support the goals of this NFID initiative:

American Academy of Family Physicians
American Academy of Physician Assistants
American Association of Diabetes Educators
American College of Physicians
American Liver Foundation
American Nurses Association
American Pharmacists Association
American Sexual Health Association
Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum
Association of Immunization Managers
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists
Hepatitis B Foundation
Hepatitis B Initiative of Washington, DC
Hep B United
Immunization Action Coalition
Infectious Diseases Society of America
National Association of County and City Health Officials
National Task Force on Hepatitis B: Focus on Asian and Pacific Islander Americans
US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy

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