

World Hepatitis Day

Health officials say the 4,000 deaths caused by Viral Hepatitis each year are preventable.

All agree that progress is being made, which is why Sunday's celebration of World Hepatitis Day is so important. Held each year since 2008, the day aims to raise global awareness of Hepatitis — a group of infectious diseases known as Hepatitis A, B, C, D and E — and encourage prevention, diagnosis and treatment. The disease affects hundreds of millions of people worldwide, and kills close to 1.4 million each year.

World Hepatitis Day is recognized in more than 100 countries annually through events such as free screenings, poster campaigns, demonstrations, concerts, talk shows and vaccination drives, among others.

Locally, providers frequently encounter patients who are afflicted.

“Mostly, we diagnose more than we treat,” said Katie Clark, a nurse practitioner at Lawrence County Memorial Hospital's Primary Care Clinic. “We usually refer them to (gastrointestinal) doctors to be treated.”

Everyone between the ages of 45 and 65 should be tested for Hepatitis C, according to Clark. She added that anyone who has a history of injection drug use is susceptible, as are people who have sexual relations with someone who is infected.

Simply put, Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. In the United States, Hepatitis is usually caused by the Hepatitis A, B or C virus. Hepatitis A causes acute, short-term infection only. Hepatitis B and C cause acute infection that can lead to chronic long-term infection, which can last a lifetime. Vaccines can prevent types A and B, but not C. There are medicines to treat and sometimes cure B and C.

Symptoms of viral hepatitis are similar for all types and include a low-grade fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, upset stomach, vomiting, stomach pain, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, joint pain and jaundice, which is when the skin and the whites of the eyes turn yellow.

“It's important to get tested, then treated,” said Clark. “There is a lot of new treatment out there. If treated, it can be taken care of, but the sooner, the better.”

For more information, contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 800-232-4636, or Hepatitis Foundation International at 800-891-0707.

About Hepatitis A: Hepatitis A is an acute infectious disease of the liver caused by the Hepatitis A virus (HAV). The disease is highly transmissible through the fecal-oral route. Hepatitis A is often asymptomatic or mild, particularly in children below five years of age, but the severity increases with age.

About Hepatitis B: Hepatitis B is a liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis B virus (HBV) and is spread through contact with infected body fluids or blood products. The symptoms can vary greatly and many of those who get infected never develop any symptoms at all. Safe and effective vaccines are available that offer high levels of protection.

About Hepatitis C: Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by infection with the Hepatitis C virus (HCV) and is mainly acquired by contact through broken skin with infectious blood. To date, there is no vaccine available against hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is most often passed on by people who inject drugs by sharing contaminated needles; transmission may also occur through tattooing, body piercing and acupuncture, if these are done in unsterile conditions.

Most people with acute Hepatitis C infection do not have any symptoms. People who develop chronic Hepatitis C also may never have any symptoms. Around 30% of people with chronic Hepatitis C develop liver damage and a small number of those go on to get cancer. Hepatitis C is considered to be the leading cause of liver cancer and liver transplants in Europe and the USA.

About Hepatitis D: Hepatitis D occurs only among people who are infected with the Hepatitis B virus. Transmission requires contact with infectious blood. At risk populations include intravenous drug abusers and people who have received multiple blood transfusions.

About Hepatitis E: Hepatitis E is uncommon in the United States and is more often seen in Europe. The infection is mostly transmitted through the consumption of contaminated and not properly cooked pork meat or other pork or game products.