

CDC to baby boomers: Get tested for hepatitis C

May 18 2012, By MIKE STOBBE , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- For the first time, health officials are proposing that all baby boomers get tested for hepatitis C.

Anyone born from 1945 to 1965 should get a one-time blood test to see if they have the liver-destroying virus, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in draft recommendations issued Friday.

Baby boomers account for 2 million of the 3.2 million Americans infected with the blood-borne virus. The virus can take decades to cause [liver damage](#), and many people don't know they're infected.

[CDC officials](#) believe the new measure could lead 800,000 more baby boomers to get treatment and could save more than 120,000 lives.

"The CDC views hepatitis C as an unrecognized health crisis for the country, and we believe the time is now for a bold response," said Dr. John W. Ward, the CDC's hepatitis chief.

Several developments drove the CDC's push for wider testing, he said.

Recent data has shown that from 1999 and 2007, there was a 50 percent increase in the number of Americans dying from hepatitis C-related diseases. Also, two drugs hit the market last year that promise to cure many more people than was previously possible.

The hepatitis C virus is most commonly spread today through sharing

needles to inject drugs. Before widespread screening of [blood donations](#) began in 1992, it was also spread through blood transfusions.

Health officials believe hundreds of thousands of new [hepatitis C](#) infections were occurring each year in the 1970s and 1980s, most of them in the younger adults of the era - the baby boomers. The [hepatitis C virus](#) was first identified in 1989.

Today, about 17,000 infections occur annually, according to CDC estimates. The virus can gradually scar the liver and lead to cirrhosis or [liver cancer](#). It is the leading cause of [liver transplants](#).

About 3 percent of baby boomers test positive for the virus, the CDC estimates.

The agency's current guidelines recommend testing people known to be at high risk, including current and past injection drug users.

The new testing recommendation is expected to become final later this year.

More information: CDC's hepatitis page:
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/C/index.htm>

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