

Hepatitis risk a concern for baby boomers

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With one in 30 baby boomers at risk for hepatitis C, more screening is needed to address potential liver problems, says Dr. Luis Balart of Tulane. Credit: Guillermo Cabrera-Rojo

(Medical Xpress)—Older adults are asking more questions about liver health now that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has formally called for baby boomers to get tested for Hepatitis C, says Dr. Luis Balart, chief of gastroenterology and hepatology at Tulane Medical Center.

"This is the first time that a generation has been determined to be of such high-risk factor that they need to be screened," says Balart, who also is professor of medicine at Tulane.

The guidelines, which came out this summer, came about after health

officials were finding more seniors testing positive for the disease. One in 30 [baby boomers](#)—the generation born from 1945 through 1965—have the virus, and most don't realize it. If left untreated, [Hepatitis C](#) can cause serious [liver diseases](#), including [liver cancer](#), and is the leading cause of [liver transplants](#) in the United States.

"Roughly 75 percent of those who have exposure don't know it because they haven't been tested," says Balart, who points out that most people with the disease don't notice any symptoms except very mild fatigue. "And fatigue can be due to many things so they don't question it."

He admits that some adults are afraid to get tested because they think there's no cure for the disease or because it has a stigma associated with intravenous drug use. The most important part of testing is getting treatment to prevent any further liver damage, he says, pointing out that newly available therapies can cure up to 70 percent of infections.

The CDC estimates one-time hepatitis C testing of baby boomers could identify more than 800,000 additional people with the disease. Hepatitis C is transmitted by blood and can be spread from sharing needles, tattoo instruments and even razors and toothbrushes. Since most boomers infected with the virus likely acquired it years ago, many are mystified as to how they got it.

Provided by Tulane University

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