

# Not so hep: hepatitis C in baby boomers

By ACSH Staff — May 21, 2012

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has [added all baby boomers](#) <sup>[1]</sup> to the list of people who should receive screening for hepatitis C, which formerly included mainly those who had injected illegal drugs, are HIV-positive, or who received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before July 1992. Hepatitis C is curable, but since most people who are infected don't know they have it, widespread screening for those at risk could save lives, according to the CDC.

Hepatitis C deaths among baby boomers have been on the rise there are currently about 3.2 million Americans with hepatitis C, and 75 percent of adults who are infected are baby boomers. The disease is blood-transmitted, so baby boomers, who grew up before concerns about HIV led to more cautious blood practices, are especially at risk. For instance, they may have received blood transfusions before screening became commonplace, or may have injected drugs with contaminated needles.

A person with hepatitis C can live without symptoms for many years, even while the disease continues to cause damage to the liver. The infection can eventually lead to liver cancer and cirrhosis. [A study](#) <sup>[2]</sup> in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* estimated that deaths each year from hepatitis C increased to about 15,000 by 2007, and deaths are on the rise as baby boomers grow older. We should expect the death rate to accelerate, explains Dr. Bloom, since many baby boomers who haven't been tested for hepatitis C may be approaching end-stage liver disease without even knowing it. According to CDC estimates, testing all baby boomers for the infection could identify 800,000 cases and save 120,000 lives.

And as screening becomes more widespread, it's important to note that drugs for hepatitis C have taken a quantum leap forward, with the approval of two new drugs last year. This makes it all the more important that people who are infected find out about their status and receive treatment. Also, drugs currently under investigation should allow patients to avoid taking interferon altogether the component of the current hepatitis C drug regimen that comes with severe side effects.

As ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom notes, It used to be that dentists didn't necessarily wear gloves, people would get tattoos in unhygienic conditions, and kids would prick their fingers and become blood brothers sharing blood just wasn't a concern back then. Now, with one in 30 baby boomers infected, it makes sense to test everyone, because most of them don't know they have it. He adds that, in this era, there's no reason for someone to be walking around with untreated hepatitis C. This disease is curable.

Instead of relying on baby boomers to specifically request this test, says ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, this should become a part of routine medical visits. Indeed, the CDC is recommending a similar policy in new draft guidelines, which would call for one-time testing of all people born between 1945 and 1965.

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[1] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-05-18/test-all-baby-boomers-for-hepatitis-c-cdc-urges.html>

[2] <http://www.annals.org/content/156/4/271.abstract>