

## **Chronic Hepatitis B is a Serious Public Health Challenge in the United States**

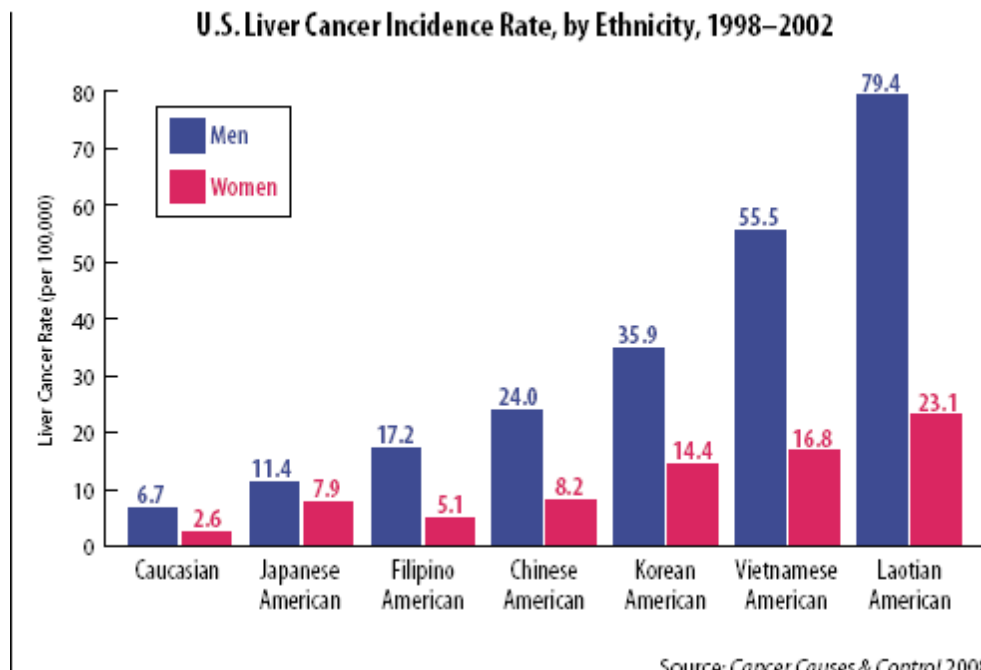
Asian Americans are disproportionately affected by chronic Hepatitis B, a serious liver disease that is frequently under-diagnosed, untreated and often results in major health complications.<sup>i</sup> In the United States, approximately 2 million people are living with chronic Hepatitis B, and it is estimated that 25% of whom will die of liver cancer or other serious consequences.

Approximately 830,000 Asian Americans, have chronic Hepatitis B — 40 percent of all cases in the U.S. — even though people of Asian descent comprise only 4 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>ii</sup> These implications are serious within the community, especially among first generation immigrants, as an estimated 1 in 10 with Hepatitis B are Asians who were born abroad.

Hepatitis B is, however, preventable with a simple test and vaccination that is readily available nationwide. For those who have chronic Hepatitis B, consistent monitoring and treatments are recommended and available as well.

### **Impact Heaviest on Asian Americans**

While most new acute cases of Hepatitis B infection in previously healthy adults are cleared by the immune system within a few months, many people – especially those infected as newborns or children – will develop chronic, lifelong infections. Many people have no signs or symptoms of infection. Without vaccination or treatment, chronic Hepatitis B can slowly destroy the liver over many years or decades, causing scarring (cirrhosis), liver disease or primary liver cancer (also known as hepatocellular carcinoma or hepatoma). It is believed to be the cause of 80 percent of all liver cancer cases worldwide.



Nationwide, Chinese-American men and women have the highest mortality rates for liver cancer of any ethnic group.<sup>iii</sup> In California in 2001, liver cancer mortality rates among Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans and Vietnamese Americans were 4 to 6 times greater than the rate for non-Hispanic whites.<sup>iv</sup>

Asian Americans tend to develop liver cancer and other severe consequences of Hepatitis B much earlier in life – in their 30s and 40s – compared with Caucasians, since they are usually infected as newborns or young children.<sup>v</sup>

## **Transmission**

The Hepatitis virus can be transmitted by any activity that involves exposure to bodily fluids, including:

- Sexual contact
- Use of contaminated needles for injection of drugs, tattooing or body piercing
- Mother-to-child transmission, particularly during childbirth
- Sharing of personal items such as razors and toothbrushes

## **Prevention and Treatment**

Although there is no cure for chronic Hepatitis B infection, treatment can help slow the disease, with the goal of preventing progression to serious liver disease and/or liver cancer. Today's Hepatitis B medications are generally well-tolerated and available in once-a-day regimens. The overall goal of treatment is to help reduce the amount of circulating virus (Hepatitis B DNA) and therefore reduce liver inflammation and liver injury. Available therapies for chronic Hepatitis B either increase the body's immune response against Hepatitis B infection or suppress the virus directly. .

A safe and effective Hepatitis B vaccine has also been available for more than 20 years and over 1 billion doses of the vaccine have been given worldwide.<sup>vi</sup> In the United States, routine immunization of infants, screening of pregnant women and vaccination of newborns of Hepatitis B-infected women have greatly reduced infections at birth over the past two decades. However, more than 45,000 Hepatitis B infections still occurred nationwide in 2006. Fewer than 5,000 of these cases were reported, in part because many new infections have only mild symptoms or none at all.<sup>vii</sup>

In addition to pregnant women, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently recommends that all people in high-risk groups be vaccinated, including sexually active adults and adolescents, health care personnel, injection drug users and children born to mothers with chronic Hepatitis B.<sup>viii</sup>

The continued high prevalence of chronic Hepatitis B underscores the importance of increased screening and immunization for eligible patients, and the need for safe and effective treatment options

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<sup>i</sup> Asian Liver Center at Stanford University Web site. Available at: <http://liver.stanford.edu>. Accessed June 30, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Cohen, C., et al. Underestimation of Chronic Hepatitis B Virus Infection in the United States of America. *Journal of Viral Hepatitis*. 2008; 15:12-13.

<sup>iii</sup> Nguyen, T.T. et al. Hepatitis Awareness, Knowledge, and Screening Among Asian Americans. *Journal of Cancer Education* 2007, Volume 22, Number 4; 267-272.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Nguyen MH, et al. Chronic Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C in Asian Americans. *Rev in Gastroenterol Disord*. 2003;3:125-134.

<sup>vi</sup> World Health Organization. Hepatitis B: Fact Sheet. 2000. Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs204/en/index.html>. Accessed June 30, 2008.

<sup>vii</sup> CDC. U.S. Disease Burden Data, 1980 - 2006. Available at: [http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/Hepatitis/resource/PDFs/disease\\_burden.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/Hepatitis/resource/PDFs/disease_burden.pdf). Accessed June 30, 2008.

<sup>viii</sup> CDC. Hepatitis B Vaccination Recommendations for Adults. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/NCIDOD/DISEASES/Hepatitis/recs/index.htm>. Accessed June 30, 2008.