

Hepatitis B Infection Rate Alarmingly High in NYC's Asian American Community

LIKE MANY INFECTIONS, it starts silently. But this one can lead to liver cancer and death. The cause is an underestimated virus, says Henry J. Pollack, M.D., Associate Professor in the Saul Krugman Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases and Immunology. Dr. Pollack is the lead author of a recent study that found that approximately 15 percent of Asians living in New York City are chronically infected with the hepatitis B virus—an infection rate 35 times higher than is found in the general U.S. population.

“These rates are extraordinarily high and underscore the need for more intensive screening in this population,” says Dr. Pollack. “There needs to be much more public awareness of this problem, and physicians caring for this population need to be more attentive to screening for hepatitis B.” With 800,000 Asians, New York City is home to the largest Asian American population in the country.

The study, funded by a grant from the New York City Council and the New York State and City Departments of Health,

was published in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly*, issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The researchers screened individuals at 12 healthcare centers and community sites throughout New York City as part of the New York City Asian American Hepatitis B Program, which provides no-cost or low-cost screening, vaccination, and treatment.

Hepatitis B can be transmitted through unprotected sex, sharing of needles, contact with infected blood, or from mother to child at birth, but not through casual contact, such as hugging or coughing. In adults the immune system is often able to clear the body of the virus before it takes hold. But in susceptible adults, children, and infants in particular, the immune system is not strong enough to shield against infection.

When the infection first takes hold, the immune system turns against the body, attacking the liver in an attempt to ward off the virus. Liver damage caused by the resulting inflammation can progress for decades, leading to cirrhosis and liver cancer. Both

require treatment to slow down this progression.

Worldwide, an estimated 400 million people are chronically infected with hepatitis B, according to Dr. Pollack. He says that while the numbers are troublesome, they are not surprising; hepatitis B is widespread across Asia. It used to be more common in the U.S., but transmission of the virus from mothers to newborns has been drastically reduced with the help of neonatal screening and vaccination over the last 15 years. In mainland China, however, prophylactic efforts have only just

of Asians in New York City is derived from test results in an important subset of the screened group: 925 individuals who have never been tested for hepatitis B. Country of birth, gender, and age also turned out to be important factors.

The highest rates of infection, for example, were found among people born in mainland China and in men between the ages of 20 and 39. These data, says Dr. Pollack, suggest which segments of the Asian population are at higher risk of harboring infection, and could guide a more targeted approach to



AMONG NEW YORK CITY'S LARGE, GROWING ASIAN POPULATION RESEARCHERS FOUND DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH RATES OF INFECTION WITH THE HEPATITIS B VIRUS. WORLDWIDE, THE VIRUS IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF CIRRHOSIS AND LIVER CANCER.

begun, due to a lack of allocated resources.

Given the new waves of immigration from Asia, especially China, the U.S. faces an under-recognized public health challenge, says Dr. Pollack.

Nearly all of the 1,836 study participants were born in east Asia, mainly China and Korea. The infection rate of 15 percent

reaching them effectively.

The long-term goal of the New York City program is to establish a national model for hepatitis B prevention in Asian American communities. “Its success,” says Dr. Pollack, “is related to the fact that it is a grassroots project and also a community-academic partnership.” ●

—Vivien Marx