

# The Urgency of Hepatitis C Screening for Baby Boomers

**Hepatitis C is a deadly disease that kills more Americans, mostly baby boomers, each year than HIV/AIDS.**

Hepatitis C is a serious and sometimes fatal disease caused by a virus that infects the liver. Over time, it can lead to advanced liver disease, liver cancer, and liver failure. More than 75 percent of the up to 3.9 million Americans estimated to be living with hepatitis C are baby boomers (those born between 1945-1965), and many remain undiagnosed and unaware of their infection.<sup>1</sup>

Because many baby boomers have lived with hepatitis C for 20-40 years, liver-related complications, including liver cancer, liver failure and liver-related deaths are expected to peak in the next decade. Without improved diagnosis of baby boomers and greater linkage to care, the incidence of hepatitis C-related liver cancer is expected to peak in 2019 at almost 14,000 cases per year.

**Hepatitis C is curable. The vast majority of infected baby boomers are unaware & undiagnosed.**

New highly effective treatments can cure most people with hepatitis C in a matter of weeks, with few side effects. But before they can be treated, the vast majority of baby boomers must be diagnosed. Screening baby boomers for hepatitis C has been shown to be cost-effective, and reduces the costs of caring for patients with cirrhosis, liver transplants, and other complications.<sup>5</sup> Most insurers, including Medicare, now cover one-time hepatitis C testing for baby boomers at no cost.

**Hepatitis C is a rising cause of advanced liver disease & death among baby boomers.**

- Baby boomers account for approximately **75 percent** of deaths caused by hepatitis C each year.
- According to the most recent data from CDC, hepatitis C contributed to the deaths of nearly **20,000 Americans** in 2013, and because the disease isn't often reported on death certificates, annual fatalities are thought to actually exceed **60,000**.<sup>2</sup>
- An estimated **35 percent** of undiagnosed baby boomers already have advanced liver disease, **12 percent** of cirrhotic patients have advanced to decompensated cirrhosis, and the projected cases of advanced liver disease, severe liver damage, and liver cancer are expected to rise through 2020.<sup>3,4</sup>

**The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) and CDC agree that all baby boomers should be tested once for hepatitis C. Health care providers and lawmakers have a responsibility to ensure that these recommendations are implemented.**

- Health care systems should integrate hepatitis C testing into their Electronic Health Records. A baby boomer prompt can be as simple as adding one additional test on a lab slip, and then the prompt goes away.
- Private insurers should encourage medical providers to test baby boomer patients for hepatitis C.
- The federal government should educate medical providers, particularly those serving Medicare beneficiaries, about the USPSTF and CDC recommendations that everyone born from 1945 -1965 receive a one-time hepatitis C test.
- Congress should approve \$62.8 million in the Fiscal Year 2016 appropriations bill for CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis to expand viral hepatitis services, including hepatitis C testing programs. Congress should also pass the Viral Hepatitis Testing Act of 2015 (S. 1287/H.R. 1101), bipartisan legislation that would improve surveillance, education, and testing programs for hepatitis B and C.
- State Medicaid programs, both traditional and expanded programs, should cover hepatitis C testing at no cost for baby boomers and others at risk.
- State Legislatures should develop policies that expand hepatitis C testing, including legislation similar to bills passed in New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Colorado which mandate or encourage providers to offer hepatitis C testing to baby boomers.

[www.nvhr.org/program](http://www.nvhr.org/program)

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. MMWR. 2012;61:1-32; Adapted from Pyenson B, et al. Consequences of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) Costs of a baby boomer Epidemic of Liver Disease. New York, NY: Milliman, Inc; May 18, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Viral Hepatitis Statistics and Surveillance." <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/Statistics/>

<sup>3</sup> McGarry LJ et al. Hepatology. 2012;55(5):1344-1355.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Davis GL, et al. Gastroenterology. 2010;138(2):513-521

<sup>5</sup> Vachon, M.-L., Dieterich, D. T. (2012), A great time to invest in baby Boomer's hepatitis C! Hepatology, 56: 1575-1577. doi: 10.1002/hep.25898