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May is Hepatitis Awareness Month

The Sarasota County Health Department will join in the 13th annual National Hepatitis Awareness Month observance during May. This observance is intended to raise awareness about importance of having a healthy liver for a healthier life, while encouraging people who are at risk for Hepatitis to get tested, and to get vaccinated against Hepatitis A, and Hepatitis B.

The liver performs vital functions in cleansing and purifying the blood and in breaking down and producing certain chemical substances that are essential for a healthy life. Public health officials say that many illnesses and conditions can cause liver inflammation or Hepatitis infection. This includes viral and bacterial infections, alcohol, chemicals and autoimmune diseases such as Lupus, Multiple Sclerosis, and Rheumatoid Arthritis. Hepatitis A is spread by eating contaminated food or drinking water while Hepatitis B is contracted through contact with blood or body fluids of an infected person.

Although Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B are preventable through vaccination, Hepatitis A is one of the most frequently reported vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States. There is no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C virus (HCV) which is found in blood and can be spread by sharing injection drug equipment, blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, occupational exposure through needle sticks, and in rare instances, sexual contact.

Symptoms when they do occur may include jaundice, dark urine, light stool, abdominal pain, and anorexia.

“Since the majority of people do not develop symptoms, Hepatitis C may go undetected for two or three decades and result in liver cirrhosis or liver failure later in life. Those who become infected with Hepatitis B or C are often at risk for other diseases such as HIV, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and Tuberculosis. Therefore, residents are urged to take charge of their health, ask questions about available testing programs and vaccinations, and work with their healthcare provider to lead a healthy lifestyle,” said Dr. Kieran Smart, medical director for the Sarasota County Health Department.

Those who are infected with HCV are encouraged to get the Hepatitis A and B vaccine, which will help to keep the liver healthy. Avoiding alcohol, medications containing acetaminophen and uncooked shellfish are other ways those with HCV can stay healthy.

The Sarasota County Health Department works with the Florida Department of Health to raise public awareness about viral hepatitis, provides education, monitors disease trends and detects outbreaks, and offers testing and vaccination at no cost for adults at increased risk for infection.

For more information, call 941-861-2900 or visit www.sarasotahealth.org.

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