New drug halts hepatitis

Male homosexuals a high risk group

By David Brown
Of the Emerald

A new vaccine holds considerable promise in preventing a treacherous strain of hepatitis common among college-age male homosexuals, according to a report by the Immunization Practices Advisory Committee.

Distribution of the hepatitis B vaccine started in June following approval of the drug late last year by the Food and Drug Administration. Almost three years of tests proved the vaccine 80-95 percent effective against hepatitis B virus, formerly known as serum hepatitis.

Hepatitis, a disease which causes inflammation of the liver, spreads through contact with body fluids such as saliva or semen, through shared intravenous needles or through the skin during handling of blood samples.

Groups with a high risk of contracting hepatitis include mentally retarded people in institutions, health care workers in contact with blood samples and homosexuals.

Unborn children are not susceptible to the virus while in the fetal stages, but tend to contract the disease at birth from mothers belonging to high risk groups, says Dr. John Wilson of the Eugene Hospital and Clinic. Special treatment is available after birth, he says.

Hepatitis B, like all viruses, is a microscopic parasite which makes its home in cells of the body and is very hard to get at, Wilson says.

Although no antibiotics exist to combat hepatitis B once it gets a foothold, someone who has already contracted the disease should seek treatment, Wilson says. The new vaccine and the more traditional ranks of "partially effective" immunizing protein globulins

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appear to have some effect against the virus during its incubation period.

Wilson stresses that gay men at the University should receive the new immunization. At college age, most gay males have not been exposed to the hepatitis B virus, he says.

The higher occurrence of hepatitis exists among gay males because they tend to have sexual relationships frequently involving oral intake of semen with other members of a encapsulated society — circumstances which lend themselves to transfer of the virus, Wilson says.

Between 10 and 20 percent of gay males become infected with hepatitis B each year, while the lifetime risk for contracting hepatitis for the general population in the United States is about 5 percent, according to the IPAC report. About 200,000 people in the United States are infected with hepatitis annually.

More than 10,000 patients are hospitalized with hepatitis B each year, the IPAC report estimates. About 4,000 people are killed each year by the virus progressing to cirrhosis of the liver, 800 by hepatitis B-related liver cancer and 250 by acute hepatitis, the report says.

While the death rate for people who have contracted the virus is relatively low, members of high-risk groups should be made aware of the vaccine, Wilson says. Death and disability from complications such as cirrhosis should not be allowed to continue now that dependable preventative medicines for hepatitis B exists, he says. It's time the problem was dealt with openly, he adds.

Other high-risk groups that are harder to "get a handle on" include immigrants and refugees from Eastern Asia and parts of Africa where the disease is prevalent and illicit users of intravenous needles, Wilson says

Of those who contract to the disease, 6 to 10 percent can become carriers, the IPAC reports. Carriers may not know they have the virus because specific symptoms such as jaundice — a yellowish discoloration of body fluids and tissue caused by liver secretions — do not always occur. The disease can also be transmitted by people who continue to carry the virus after its acute stage because of an inability to establish immunity, Wilson says.

Tests to discover whether a member of a high-risk group needs the vaccination or already has an immunity are offered by the University Student Health Center and by various Pathology Consultants Laboratories in Eugene.

Such test results help one to avoid the high cost of unnecessary vaccinations. However, high-risk persons unlikely to be immune may want to forgo the cost of the tests and seek vaccination, which is available at the laboratories and health center for about \$100.



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