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# Hepatitis C spreading in Mercer

## Students, doctors team up to educate public

By KATHY KISH  
Bluefield Daily Telegraph

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*'Mercer County is rampant with it (hepatitis C) if you look at statistics.'*

— Dr. Chris Howard  
Of Lewisburg

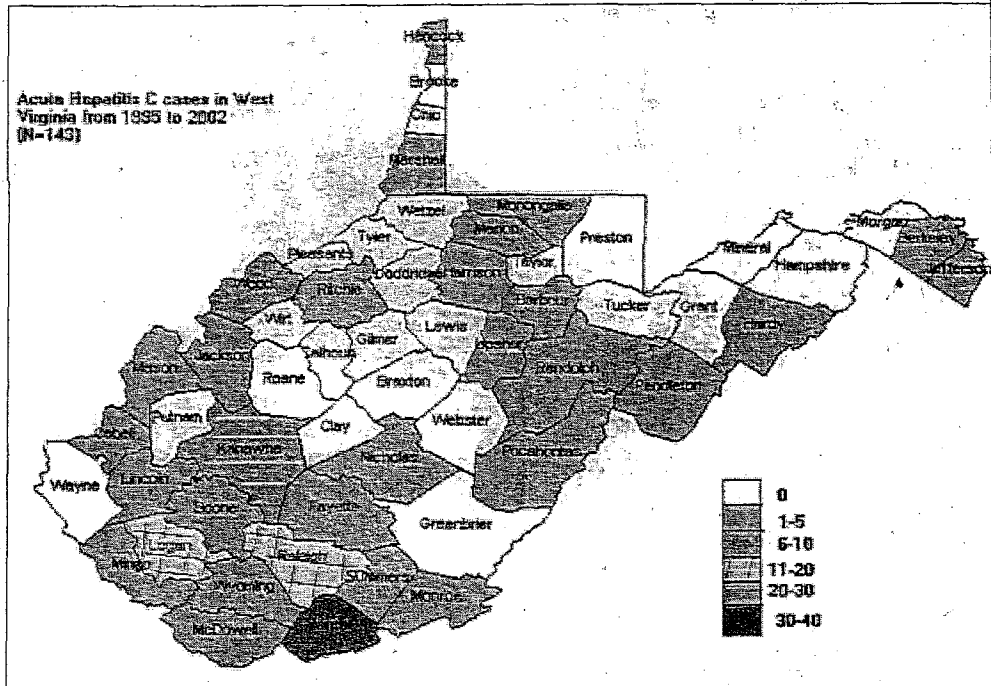
While the hepatitis virus is spreading throughout Mercer County, local students and doctors have teamed up to spread the news that it is a virus that needs to be taken more seriously.

The SouthEastern West Virginia Area Health Education Center has coordinated a team of college students and physicians to enlighten the public about the disease and its particular prevalence in the region.

According to a map provided by the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau of Public Health, Division of Surveillance and Disease Control, Mercer County has the highest incidence of hepatitis in West Virginia, with 30 to 40 cases of acute hepatitis in the county. Some counties have fewer than five cases, even zero.

"Mercer County is rampant with it (hepatitis C) if you look at statistics," Dr. Chris Howard, of Lewisburg, said. "We see a ton of it in that area and that's the reason we decided to take it on as project."

Howard said he has a particular interest in the project because he is originally from the Princeton area. Dr. Wayne L. Brackenrich, of Rich Creek, Va., is lead preceptor for the team. Several Bluefield State College nursing students are involved, as are students from West



Map from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau of Public Health, Division of Surveillance and Disease Control.

Virginia Osteopathic School of Medicine, West Virginia University and Marshall

University who are from the Bluefield and Princeton. Howard said there is some

speculation that intravenous drug abuse is one factor that makes the incidence of hepatitis particularly high in the area. However, he noted that it may just be a matter of "particularly good reporting by the health department."

"Our goal is to make people aware of the risk factors and to let them know that if they happen to fall into any of the high-risk categories they should get tested," Howard said. "We want to promote awareness. Everybody from physicians, nursing students, medical students, etc., are trying to come together and put together a program for this."

So what is hepatitis C? According to information provided by the DHHR, hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) that is found in the blood of infected people. Many people who get hepatitis C carry the virus the rest of their lives. A few of these people become very ill and some experience liver failure. Hepatitis C is spread by direct contact with the blood of a person who has it. A blood test for HCV can tell if a person has ever been infected.

People are at risk for hepatitis C if they have ever injected street drugs, even if they experimented a few times many years ago; have a job that exposes them to human blood; are a hemodialysis patient; or have received a blood transfusion prior to July 1992.

People might also be at risk if they were treated for clotting factors with a blood product made before 1987; received a solid organ transplant such as kidney, liver or heart from an infected donor; were born to hepatitis C-infected mother; had sex with a person infected with HCV; or live with someone who was infected with HCV and shared items such as razors or toothbrushes that might have had blood on them.

The information from the WVDHHR indicates that symptoms may include yellowing of the skin and eyes; loss of appetite; nausea and vomiting; fever; a very, very tired feeling; or stomach pain. Even if people don't have symptoms, they may want to be tested anyway if they are in a high-risk category for coming into contact with the virus.

For example, a person may contract it by sharing needles or any instruments to inject drugs, through exposure to blood at work or from sex partners.

There is nothing pointing to HCV being spread by food or water, or by sneezing, coughing, hugging, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses or other casual contact.

"Our goal is to reduce newly acquired hepatitis C cases to no more than one case per 100,000 people," Howard said. — Contact Kathy Kish at [kkish@bdonline.com](mailto:kkish@bdonline.com)

### Protecting others if you are infected:

It is possible to have hepatitis C but show no symptoms and still infect others. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C, but your choices can protect others.

- Do not share toothbrushes, razors or other personal care items that could come in contact with blood.
- Cover open sores or other breaks in your skin.
- Do not donate

your blood, plasma, body organs, other tissue or sperm.

□ If you are injecting drugs, do not share needles nor any instruments used for preparation. Seek treatment for drug use. If you cannot stop, do not reuse or share syringes, water or drug works.

□ If you have one long-term steady sex partner, you do not need to change your sexual practices. There is a low chance of giving hepatitis C to that partner through sexual activity. Talk to your sex partner about hepatitis C.

□ If you have more than one sexual partner, reduce the number of partners. Use safer sexual practice and condoms.

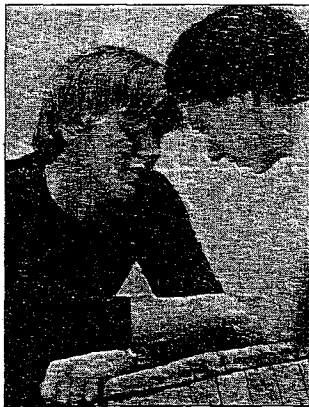


Photo illustrations

### When you have the virus...

It is important to talk to your partner about hepatitis C.

- Talk to your partner about hepatitis C.

□ If you are a pregnant woman, there is a small chance of transmission to your baby during delivery. Your baby should be tested at age 1.

### How to protect yourself when infected:

- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A. Ask about the

vaccine for hepatitis B.

- Stop drinking or reduce alcohol intake drastically.
- See a doctor regularly. Ask if you are a candidate for treatment.
- There is no need to avoid pregnancy or breast feeding, but inform your doctor and baby's doctor about your HCV infection.



### Risk factors for HCV (hepatitis C virus) infection

- Long-term hemodialysis
- Received blood transfusion or organ transplant prior to July 1992
- Intravenous drug use
- Sexual contact with HCV-positive partner
- Occupational exposure to human blood

Information provided by the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau of Public Health.

