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For Immediate Release

National hepatitis awareness month begins in May

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Division of Surveillance and Disease Control and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are announcing May as National Hepatitis Awareness Month.

Hepatitis is an infection of the liver and is caused by many things such as toxins, bacteria, and viruses. Hepatitis causes the liver to swell and prevents it from working properly. The liver is an important organ because it helps digest food, store energy, and remove poisons from the body. Hepatitis A, B, and C are the most common types of viral hepatitis found in the United States. Hepatitis is also one of many major public health concerns in the United States. In 2005, there were more than 10,500 cases of acute viral hepatitis reported nationwide. Also, nearly 1.25 million people are chronically infected with hepatitis B and nearly 3.2 million are chronically infected with hepatitis C. Symptoms of hepatitis include yellowing of the skin and/or eyes, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, and a loss of appetite. The Department of Health and Human Resources would like to share information on how West Virginians can prevent the spread of hepatitis.

Hepatitis A Virus (HAV) is one of the most common vaccine-preventable diseases reported in the United States and is spread by eating or drinking food or water contaminated with fecal matter. HAV infections usually last between 3-6 months and once recovered, lead to life-long immunity. Good hand washing techniques and proper sanitation can greatly reduce the spread of hepatitis A. In 2006, 4 cases of acute hepatitis were reported in West Virginia.

Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) is spread through contact with infected blood or body fluids, most commonly with unprotected sexual activity. HBV infections usually last for 6 months but in certain cases a person can be infectious for life. HBV infections have declined by 75

percent in the United States due to immunization programs for children. The majority of child and adolescents under the age of 18 years (who have been born and raised in the United States) are now protected. Practicing safer sex and not sharing needles or drug injection equipment can protect you against hepatitis B infection. In 2006, 76 cases of acute and 66 cases of chronic hepatitis B were reported in West Virginia.

Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) is spread through contact with infected blood. You could be at risk for HCV if you have received a blood transfusion before July 1992, ever injected drugs, or shared needles or ink wells for body piercing or tattoos. There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, but medical care to manage the infection is available. Prevention tips for avoiding hepatitis C include: not sharing needles, or “works” (cotton, cooker, spoon, etc.); getting help for drug use; not sharing items that might have blood on them; practicing safe sex; and avoiding alcohol. In 2006, 6 acute and 2,168 chronic cases of hepatitis C were reported in West Virginia.

Awareness is the first step in protecting yourself against hepatitis. If you are at risk or need further information, contact your physician, local health department or the West Virginia Division of Surveillance and Disease Control at (304) 558-5358 or toll free within West Virginia at (800) 423-1271.

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