

# PHYSICIAN'S WEEKLY

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## Closing Gaps in Hepatitis B Screening



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Chronic hepatitis B, which is caused by infection with the hepatitis B virus (HBV), disproportionately affects people in the United States who are of Asian descent. An estimated 2 million people in America are living with the disease, and Asian Americans account for over half of this prevalence. First-generation Asian

Liver Disease showed that many physicians serving the Asian-American community fail to routinely screen for HBV. The study—which was based on data from 233 Asian-American physicians in the New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and Chicago metropolitan areas—demonstrated that only 50% of doctors reported routinely screening all of their Asian-American patients for HBV. In addition, 40% of doctors surveyed said they had screened no more than a quarter of Asian-American patients. The most frequently-cited reason for not offering screening was the perception that patients were not at risk for the virus.

cure for HBV, but it can be treated effectively when it's diagnosed early. Seven FDA-approved medicines are available for chronic HBV, including once-daily oral antiviral therapies that suppress viral replication. Especially for the Asian-American population, it's critical that physicians implement the CDC guidelines on routine HBV screening. Stepping up HBV detection and treatment for those at greatest risk may greatly reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with this disease. **RW**

*“Low levels of HBV screening in the Asian-American community suggest that an alarming number of infected individuals are going undiagnosed and untreated.”*

Americans are at the highest risk. It's estimated that as many as one in 10 foreign-born Asians are living with chronic hepatitis B, a rate more than 20 times greater than that of the general population. This discrepancy reflects the high incidence of HBV infection in several Asian countries, where immunization against the disease is not yet standard practice. As a result of chronic HBV infection, Asian Americans are at greater risk of developing liver cancer, and are 2.4 times more likely than Caucasians to die from liver cancer.

### New Survey on Screening Practices

Despite clear evidence of the heavy burden of hepatitis B on Asians, a recent survey my colleagues and I presented at the 2009 International Symposium on Viral Hepatitis and

These low levels of HBV screening in the Asian-American community suggest that an alarming number of infected individuals are going undiagnosed and untreated. According to some estimates, up to two-thirds of Asian Americans living with chronic hepatitis B do not know their HBV status. This can endanger not only their own personal health but also that of their partners and families.

### Updated CDC Recommendations

To better diagnose people with chronic hepatitis B, the CDC issued guidelines in September 2008 (Table). It recommends that all foreign-born Asian Americans be tested for HBV and referred to medical care as needed. Clinicians should also be aware that there is no simple

### Table Summarizing CDC Screening Recommendations

Routine testing for chronic HBV is recommended for:

- People born in geographic regions with HBsAg prevalence of >2%, which includes all Asian countries.
- Pregnant women.
- Infants born to HBsAg-positive mothers.
- Household contacts and sex partners of HBV-infected persons.
- HIV-infected people.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Injection-drug users.
- People who may have been exposed to HBV who could benefit from post-exposure prophylaxis (eg, needlestick injury to a healthcare worker or sexual assault).
- People receiving cytotoxic or immunosuppressive therapy.

Abbreviations: HBV, hepatitis B virus; HBsAg, hepatitis B surface antigen.

Source: Adapted from: Weinbaum CM, et al. *MMWR Recomm Rep*. 2008;57(RR-8):1-20.

*Danny Chu, MD, has indicated to Physician's Weekly that he has worked as a consultant and paid speaker for Gilead, Bristol-Myers Squibb, and Novartis. For more information on this article, including references, please visit: [www.physweekly.com](http://www.physweekly.com).*