



Town of Darien

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The Curious Case of Hepatitis C

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If one were to quiz local doctors about the top 5 diseases found on Darien's reportable disease data tables, most would rattle off such illnesses as Lyme, Influenza, MRSA and other conditions thought to be quite common. By and large, they would be correct. But not 100% correct.

Let's look at the data for 2013 - 2014:

1. Hepatitis C (11 cases)
2. Chlamydia (15 cases)
3. Lyme (11 cases)
4. Influenza (34 cases)
5. Campylobacteriosis/C. Diff (4 cases)

Now, admittedly, the process for reporting diseases is somewhat flawed. There are many diseases on the list (notably Lyme and Influenza) that are frequently diagnosed and treated without testing and therefore not reported. However, one cannot ignore the fact that a disease like Hepatitis C is in the top 5. In fact, Hepatitis C has consistently been in the "top 5" since 2008-2009. Data before 2008-2009 was not examined.

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral organism spread through the exchange of body products. The most common ways that it can be transmitted is through IV drug use, sexual exposures and through the reception of blood products before screening mechanisms were put into place. Initially, patients go through an acute phase when infected, the symptoms of which are fairly nonspecific: fatigue, malaise, nausea and weakness. The majority of these patients will then go on to develop chronic hepatitis C. Chronic hepatitis C is a slow progressing infection that can lead to cirrhosis (hardening) of the liver as well as liver cancer. Liver transplantation for these patients is often the only hope.

So why is it consistently in the "top 5"?

Does Darien have an underground heroin scene? Is there more risky sexual behavior happening than one might expect? Perhaps, but the true answer may be due to the increased awareness and surveillance by the medical community.

In 2012, the CDC reissued their guidelines for screening certain patients for hepatitis C. Why? Well, we have made impressive advancements with this particular infection. An accurate test was developed. We also now have treatment options that work. As a result, we test more frequently for the infection.

So, who should be tested?

- Persons born from 1945 through 1965
- Persons who have ever injected drugs
- Recipients of blood transfusions or solid organ transplants before July 1992
- Patients who have ever received long-term hemodialysis treatment
- Persons with known exposures to HCV, such as
 - health care workers after needlesticks involving HCV-positive blood
 - recipients of blood or organs from a donor who later tested HCV-positive
- All persons with HIV infection
- Patients with signs or symptoms of liver disease (e.g., abnormal liver enzyme tests)
- Children born to HCV-positive mothers

Remember, tests will provide the information needed to receive the best treatment possible, so *be safe and get tested!*

If you have further questions or concerns, contact your physician.