

Free Hepatitis B tests in Bethel and Kotzebue

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Free screenings for Hepatitis B infection will be offered by the State Division of Public Health at the Bethel Health Fair on May 6 and 7 and at the Kotzebue Health Fair on May 13 and 14.

The screenings are part of a joint Federal-State effort to identify carriers of the disease and those at risk of contracting the disease because of a close personal relationship with a carrier. Persons determined to be at high risk of infection will be offered a three-dose course of a recently-licensed vaccine to prevent them from contracting Hepatitis B.

Since March 7, more than 7,000 people in the state have had blood samples taken for Hepatitis B testing, according to State Director of Public Health Dr. Stuart Rabeau.

Dr. Rabeau said that more than 400 blood tests are being run each day at the state laboratory in Fairbanks where all blood samples for Hepatitis B taken in the state are sent for analysis.

The state's Hepatitis B screening program began the second week of March in the Lower Yukon River communities of Sheldon Point, Russian Mission, and Fortuna Ledge (Marshall), and in Stony River at the junction of the Kuskokwim and Stony Rivers.

Dr. Rabeau said the results

in those communities were about what was expected. The Yupik Eskimo of Alaska has the highest incidence in the nation of the disease.

Dr. Rabeau said that in the four communities "serological markers" were present in from 22 percent to 59 percent of the population, depending on the community. This means, says Dr. Rabeau, that these people had an ingredient in their blood which showed that they were either infected with the disease at that time or had had it at one time.

The "carrier" rate, that is the incidence of people who are capable of passing the disease to others, ranged from 8 percent to 15.5 percent of the population, depending on the community.

All "carriers" have "blood markers" but not all people with "markers" are carriers.

The incidence in the population of "markers" and "carriers" was lowest at Stony River. However, of those who have had the disease, the carrier rate was highest at Stony River.

The first dose of vaccine was administered in these four communities at the end of March.

When the "carrier rate" is over five percent, the state's policy is to vaccinate all community members who do not have "blood markers." Other-

wise, the vaccine is administered selectively only to those persons highly susceptible to the disease because of contact with a carrier, Rabeau said.

Vaccination consists of three intramuscular shots of the vaccine. The second shot should be given one month after the

first and the last shot should be given six months after the first. When properly administered, the vaccine is 96 percent effective, Rabeau said.

A full course of the vaccine costs \$100. It has no effect on persons who have had the disease. This is why the screening

program and the selectiveness with which the vaccine is administered, Rabeau said.

Fifty to 60 percent of all Hepatitis B infections are without symptoms and without screening would go undetected, according to information from the Alaska Division of Public Health.

The Hepatitis B virus can affect the liver and the arteries, with the most serious effects in carriers. Nationwide, six to 10 percent of affected populations are carriers, but there may be three to four times this percentage in a Yupik Eskimo community.

About one-fourth of carriers will develop cirrhosis of the liver and about 10 percent will develop liver cancer. A fatal inflammatory condition of the arteries can also develop.

There is no cure for the virus. Only its symptoms are treated, Rabeau stated.

Dr. Rabeau said that close to 1,000 school children and teachers in Bethel have already been screened. The school children showed about a 20 percent infection rate and a little over five percent carrier rate. The first dose of the vaccine has been given to the remaining students and teachers. Bethel adults are being screened May 6-7.

The governor's office including the governor was screened last week.



Sen. John Sackett (R-Ruby), chief sponsor of a bill to contribute \$250,000 to a joint Federal-State Hepatitis-B screening program that began March 7, looks on as the bill is signed April 15 by Governor Sheffield.