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## Licking County Health Department

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### **National Hepatitis Awareness Month May 16, 2011**

LICKING COUNTY, OHIO - The month of May is traditionally known as "Hepatitis Awareness Month". It is a time to consider the need to take care of one's liver. The word "hepatitis" simply means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. According to Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, "In the United States, the most common types are Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. Heavy alcohol use, toxins, some medications and certain medical conditions can also cause hepatitis."

Hepatitis A is an acute liver disease caused by the Hepatitis A virus, lasting from a few weeks to several months. It does not lead to chronic infection. It is caused by ingestion of fecal matter, even in microscopic amounts, from close person-to-person contact or ingestion of contaminated food or drinks. Luckily, there is a vaccine available to prevent this type of hepatitis. Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for all children starting at age 1 year, travelers to certain countries, and others at risk.

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the Hepatitis B virus. It ranges in severity from a mild illness, lasting a few weeks (acute), to a serious, long-term (chronic) illness that can lead to liver disease or liver cancer. It comes about through contact with infectious blood, semen, and other body fluids, from having sex with an infected person, sharing contaminated needles to inject drugs, or from an infected mother to her newborn. Hepatitis B vaccination is recommended for all infants, older children and adolescents who were not vaccinated previously, and adults at risk for Hepatitis B virus infection.

Hepatitis C, another liver disease, is caused by the Hepatitis C virus. Infection sometimes results in an acute illness, but most often becomes a chronic condition that can lead to cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. Its transmission depends on having contact with the blood of an infected person, primarily through sharing contaminated needles to inject drugs. There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C.

Viral hepatitis is the leading cause of liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplantation. An estimated 4.4 million Americans are living with chronic hepatitis; most do not know they are infected. Many people with chronic viral hepatitis do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. Even though a person has no symptoms and may appear healthy, the virus can still be detected in the blood, and damage to the liver can still be occurring. Symptoms of chronic viral hepatitis can take up to 30 years to develop, and damage to the liver can silently occur during this time.

With early detection, many people can get lifesaving care and treatment that can limit disease progression, prevent cancer deaths and help break the cycle of unknowingly transmitting the virus to others. If you are concerned about viral hepatitis, talk to your health care professional. For more information contact Mary Beth Hagstad, R.N., M.S.N., C.N.S., at (740) 349-6685 or visit <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis>.