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San Francisco — help us make it hep B free now

By Fiona Ma

Awareness campaigns for health issues and social causes are as numerous as tourists at Fisherman's Wharf, and it's hard not to feel awareness campaign fatigue. But one of them has special meaning to me as a California official, an Asian American and a person living with chronic Hepatitis B. May is Hepatitis B awareness month, shining the light on a condition that affects 2 million Americans.

Chronic hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus, a pathogen that is up to 100 times more easily transmitted than HIV. The disease is often called a "silent killer" because it can cause liver cancer, cirrhosis or liver failure without producing symptoms. This may be one reason the Bay Area has the highest liver cancer rate in the nation.

As many as 1 in 10 Asian/Pacific Islanders in America, particularly those from China, Korea and Vietnam, are chronically infected with HBV. This disproportionate impact reflects the high prevalence of the disease in Asia, where HBV immunization is not yet standard practice.

My own experience is typical: I contracted Hepatitis B at birth from my mother, who was born in China, but didn't discover this until I tried to give blood at the age of 22.

In a recent study conducted here in San Francisco, a shocking two-thirds of Asian Americans with chronic Hepatitis B were not aware they were infected. Clearly, we need to ramp up

Free hepatitis B virus screening

One day only

Where: Asian Heritage Street Celebration (Post St. from Laguna to Webster), San Francisco

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday, May 17

Regularly scheduled free screening

Where: Asian Pacific Wellness Center, 730 Polk St., 4th floor. Call (415) 292-3400 for appointment.

When: No fee on Wednesdays and Fridays, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., or on the first Saturday of the month, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Where: UCSF Medical Center at Mount Zion, 2330 Post St., 1st floor. (415) 885-3580.

When: No fee on the first Saturday of each month, 9 a.m. to noon.

Regularly scheduled sliding-scale fee

Where: Chinese Hospital, 845 Jackson St., 1st floor, laboratory. (415) 677-2303.

When: Monday through Saturday, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

To learn more about San Francisco's efforts, please visit www.sfhepbfree.org and get tested today.

screening efforts in the city, and I am proud to support the "San Francisco Hep B Free" campaign in its unprecedented effort to screen and vaccinate all at risk. Routine screening and vaccination is a critical first step, but there is much more we can do to address HBV, including educating ourselves about this disease.

HBV was once thought only to affect people who had unprotected sex or shared needles. Today we know better — not least is the fact that the virus is often passed from mother to

child at birth.

We can also encourage those who are infected to seek treatment. While there is no cure for chronic Hepatitis B, the number of available treatments has grown steadily in recent years. Today, convenient once-a-day medications can help to combat the disease, potentially preventing fatal liver damage. Finally, more should be done to ensure that all people who need treatment actually get it, because the direct and indirect financial burden of chronic Hepatitis in the United States

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reaches \$1 billion annually.

In January 2008, the California Assembly passed Assembly Bill 158, legislation that is vital to increasing access to quality health care for Californians living with HBV. The bill is in the state Senate for approval and I urge its speedy ratification.

This month is an important opportunity to raise awareness of a deadly, but preventable disease. We can wipe out this disease as long as people know to get vaccinated and we treat those already infected. However, it will take more than an awareness month to stop the devastating impact of chronic Hepatitis B. Until viral hepatitis is broadly recognized as a serious public health concern, it will continue to threaten the health of Americans in San Francisco and across the United States.

Fiona Ma, a Democrat, represents San Francisco in the state Assembly and is the Assembly majority whip. E-mail comments to forum@sfchronicle.com.