

Becoming Hep B Free

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Hepatitis B is linked to an increased risk of liver cancer among Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. Learn more about this disease and the campaign to fight it.

If San Francisco becomes the first city to stamp out hepatitis B — the contagious liver infection linked to liver cancer and caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV) — then a historic coalition of more than 50 Asian Pacific Islander (API) and healthcare organizations, including Brown & Toland Physicians, can rightfully claim to have met its goal.

Dubbed the **San Francisco Hep B Free Campaign**, this initiative aims to screen, vaccinate and treat all San Francisco API residents for hepatitis B by providing convenient, free or low-cost blood tests at partnering health facilities and events. Already, it has spawned similar hepatitis B campaigns across the country, from Alameda County to Philadelphia.

“As an elected official, I feel it is my responsibility to educate people about hepatitis B,” says state Assemblywoman **Fiona Ma**, who is the campaign’s honorary chair. By encouraging the community to take swift action, she adds, “hopefully, we’re saving lives.”

The need to increase public awareness about hepatitis B is fully appreciated by Assemblywoman Ma, who has the virus, passed from generation to generation in her family. Once Ma understood the threat she faced as an HBV carrier (including a one in four chance of developing liver cancer), she consulted her doctor and now gets tested regularly. She urged her mother to do the same. “Last December, doctors removed a cancerous part of my mother’s liver, and now she’s fine,” says Ma. “The message is that you have to catch hepatitis B early. My family is living proof.”

Chilling Statistics, Achievable Goals

Ma’s family exemplifies the virus’ threat to public health: An estimated one in 10 Asians are chronically infected with hepatitis B and are four times more likely to die from liver cancer compared with the general population; San Francisco has the highest rate of liver cancer in the nation, due to its high population of Asian-Americans. The campaign’s intense efforts have been likened to the coordinated assault on AIDS and HIV, with an important exception: the imminent chance for success.

For More Information

[San Francisco Hep B Free](#)

[San Francisco Department of Public Health](#)

[Stanford Asian Liver Center](#)

Should You Be Tested for Hepatitis B?

Remember this: Hepatitis B is a contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis B virus and spread via blood-to-blood contact, commonly from mother to child. It is both preventable and treatable, but symptoms are usually absent. If you have one or more of the risk factors for hepatitis B infection, you should get a simple HPV blood test. The blood test will determine whether you are immune to hepatitis B, or susceptible to hepatitis B and need vaccination, or infected with hepatitis B and need further evaluation by a physician.

Those at risk for infection include:

- Persons born in places where hepatitis B infection is common (including Asia, Africa, most of Eastern Europe, Spain, and parts of Central America, South America, and the Caribbean) and their children.
- Injecting drug users.
- Hemodialysis patients.
- People having sex with an HBV-infected partner.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Those living in the same household with an HBV-infected person.

“We have a safe and effective vaccine, we have good oral medications to slow or prevent liver damage, and we have decent tests to determine what someone needs,” says **Janet Zola** of the San Francisco Department of Public Health and one of Hep B Free’s cofounders and current leads. “We just have got to get people to know it.”

Getting the Public’s Attention

Effective use of the media to spread the message about hepatitis B has been a vital Hep B Free strategy, owing in no small part to the pivotal involvement of one of the campaign’s cofounders, **Ted Fang**, director of the AsianWeek Foundation, and its marketing committee, chaired by **John Fisher** of Brown & Toland. Print and billboard ads have been especially attention getting and feature actual members of the San Francisco API community, not professional models. “The ads have been highly visible, both locally and nationally. They get people talking about hepatitis B,” says **Mai-Sie Chan**, M.D., a Brown & Toland internist, who’s among a group of physicians featured in the latest ads and practices in the Chinatown community. “It’s a good way to participate in solving a problem that is relevant not only to the Asian Pacific Islander community but to everyone.”