

## TOP NEWS

# Ma urges hepatitis B awareness

Bonnie Eslinger, The Examiner  
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### **SAN FRANCISCO -**

Fiona Ma did not learn she had chronic hepatitis B until she tried to give blood at the age of 22. Now 40, the member of the Board of Supervisors is hoping her story will encourage other Asian Americans, who are at greater risk, to get tested for the deadly disease.

While only 3 percent of the nation's population has been diagnosed with chronic hepatitis B, Asian American and Pacific Islander Americans make up more than half of these cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control. In San Francisco, nearly 30 percent of the population is of Asian descent, which means thousands of residents are likely to be chronic carriers.

"This is an issue near and dear to my heart, because I myself am a hep B carrier," said Ma, speaking at a press conference called Friday to promote awareness of the disease among San Francisco's Asian Pacific community.

Ma noted that her brother, who is only two years younger than she, is also a hepatitis B carrier, but her sister, who is 16 years younger, is not. That's likely because a hepatitis B vaccine became available in 1982, leading to routine vaccination of newborns.

Hepatitis B, caused by a virus that attacks the liver, occurs when blood from an infected person enters the body of a person that is not infected. A mother can transmit it to her baby during birth. It can also be spread through having sex with an infected person without using a condom and by sharing needles, among other means of transmission.

The children of immigrants from areas with high rates of infection, such as China, are at high risk for contracting the disease. Without vaccination, 90 percent of infants infected at birth develop a long lasting, chronic infection.

Often called the "silent disease" because about 30 percent of those infected have no signs or symptoms, in the United States, about 1.25 million people have chronic hepatitis B. Of those infected, 5,000 die from hepatitis B and hepatitis B-related liver complications each year.

Dr. Mitch Katz, San Francisco's director of public health, called hepatitis B a "deadly but preventable disease" and encouraged The City's Asian Pacific community to get tested and vaccinated, if needed.

Currently, all newborns in San Francisco are automatically vaccinated against hepatitis B. The City also spends approximately \$200,000 a year to provide about 8,000 adult hepatitis vaccines to local public health centers and private nonprofit organizations at no charge.

For information on free or low-cost hepatitis testing and vaccination sites in San Francisco, call 415-554-2844. Free screenings will also be offered at the Asian American Heritage Celebration in San Francisco's Sunset District, on May 20.

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