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### Hepatitis C – The Silent Killer

EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP, N.J. (Jan. 5) – The death of Grammy Award-winning singer Natalie Cole is yet another reminder that the hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a disease that can lay dormant in the body for decades, but that early detection and new treatments often lead to cures in many cases.

“The current medications available to treat HCV are not only highly effective, with cure rates exceeding 97 percent, but are very well tolerated and without significant side effects,” says Dr. John Santoro, director of the Hepatitis Treatment Center at Atlantic Gastroenterology Associates in Egg Harbor Township.

“Treatment can be done without the necessity to take shots of interferon as in the past,” he adds, mentioning a drug that’s been used to treat hepatitis C patients for years, but does have side effects similar to chemotherapy.

Cole, the 65-year-old daughter of late singing legend Nat King Cole, died December 31 of what her family called complications from on-going health issues. She was diagnosed with HCV in 2007, which eventually resulted in a kidney transplant for Cole in 2009.

When she discovered the disease can go undetected for years, even decades, Cole, a frequent Atlantic City casino entertainer since the late 1970s, believed her addiction to heroin more than 25 years ago probably led to the disease. Intravenous drug users have been known to spread the illness by sharing needles, which she admitted doing.

“There’s a reason why hepatitis C is known by many as a ‘silent killer,’ or a ‘silent disease,’” Santoro adds. Liver failure due to hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver transplants in the United States, he adds. Chronic hepatitis C is also a major cause of cirrhosis and liver cancer, which most often lead to liver transplantation.

“Anywhere from 70 to 80 percent with HCV don’t experience any symptoms or show signs of the virus,” Santoro explains. “If symptoms do occur – and they can be flu-like, ranging from feeling tired to joint pain, sore muscles, fever and nausea, among others – we urge people to get tested as soon as possible. The CDC and the

United States Public Health Service have recently recommended screening for all baby boomers born between 1945 and 1965. Baby boomers have five times the incidence of Hepatitis C compared to the general population.”

In addition to drug use, the disease has been traced to tattoos, intranasal cocaine use and blood transfusions prior to 1992. Anyone who fits into those categories should be screened for the disease with a simple blood test.

Santoro says most people with acute Hepatitis C eventually develop chronic Hepatitis C, which means the virus has remained in their body for 6 months or longer and yet they still have no symptoms. It’s very common to have the virus for 15 years or longer before being diagnosed.”

Testing for HCV is a simple blood test. If the test is positive, the physicians with the Hepatitis Treatment Center can discuss the different treatment options available. Some hepatitis C protocols have a cure rate of 97 percent with few side effects.

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