

# High schools targeted to lower hepatitis B rate

BY HELEN ALTONN  
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The state is stepping up efforts to reduce Hawaii's chronic hepatitis B rate, which is six times greater than the national average.

Kaimuki and McKinley high schools on Oahu have been selected to test the possibility of a state-wide hepatitis B vaccination program for high school students.

The pilot program, starting in the fall, was announced by state Health Director Lawrence Milke and Alfred Suga, Department of Education interim superintendent of instruction.

Judy Strait-Jones, public health educator, said the Education Department, in choosing the two schools, looked at areas with a high immigrant population. "We would love to continue the following year with all high schools if we can find funding some place."

The Keiki Booster Coalition, made up of community groups with health care providers, will conduct the pilot project.

The Health Department in the next year will continue providing free vaccine to physicians for patients ages 6 to 18. Free hepatitis B shots will be available in Health Department clinics. And vaccinations will be provided to fourth- and fifth-graders in all public and private schools statewide.

## Vaccinations for children

For the last two years, fifth-graders were offered hepatitis B vaccine, and there was "excellent coverage," Strait-Jones said. "We're trying to close the gap."

Since 1991, newborns have received the first hepatitis B vaccination in the hospital.

Three shots are needed in a series for at least 20 years' protection, Strait-Jones said. The often

fatal disease can cause liver cancer.

The state is trying to protect young people from becoming chronic carriers of the disease, she said. "People can be symptomatic. What we're looking at is an explosion 20 to 30 years down the line."

The hepatitis B virus is transmitted in the same ways as the HIV virus, she said. "But it's even more hardy and can stay around and be viable on a drop of blood for at least a week."

The Department of Health hopes to duplicate its successful elementary school hepatitis B campaign in the high schools.

## Pilot immunization program

Milke said the pilot project "will enable health officials to identify barriers to immunizing older children and enable staff to implement an effective immunization campaign in the community at

large."

"Hepatitis B is one of the state's top public health priorities," said state epidemiologist Paul Effler.

"Although our current hepatitis B vaccination programs will result in immediate benefit by preventing new infections, the real payoff will happen in the next 20 to 30 years when there is a reduction in chronic liver disease and liver cancer caused by hepatitis B," Effler said.

Strait-Jones said about 30 percent of people who get the hepatitis B virus have no known risk factors. "So that's kind of scary."

Even strong athletes can get the disease, she said. The Evander Holyfield/Henry Akinwande boxing match scheduled last month in Madison Square Garden was canceled after Akinwande tested positive for hepatitis B, she noted.

The disease can be transmitted from infected to healthy persons through sports, games, sexual ac-

tivities and other close contact, or by sharing objects such as toothbrushes, earrings or needles.

The Health Department began attacking hepatitis B two years ago with free vaccination clinics on all islands and immunizations at malls and stores and in some intermediate and high school clinics.

## History of success

The hepatitis B campaign started last September with free vaccine given to physicians for patients 6 to 18 years old.

More than 148,089 doses of vaccine have been distributed to doctors and clinics since then — a 58 percent increase over the same period the year before, the department reported.

Normally costing about \$300, the three shots will be available free to 12- to 18-year-olds at clinics and doctors' offices through Aug. 31, 1999.

The program is offered as part of a grant from the Queen's Health System, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Health.

Youths completing the shots by the middle of next month are eligible for drawings for various prizes, including a free mainland trip on Hawaiian Airlines, a neighbor island vacation package courtesy of Hawaiian Airlines, Astor Hotels & Resorts and Budget Rent A-Car.

Teens can call 539-2500 for a recorded message about a coupon rewards program.

Adults should also protect themselves from the virus, Strait-Jones said. "You protect where you can protect. For hepatitis C, there is no vaccine."

For information about the places and times vaccinations will be offered through August, call 596-8332.