Jon Secada: Raising Our Voices Against Hepatitis C

In memory of his father, Cuban-American singer and songwriter Jon Secada joins the fight against HCV.

April 2, 2012 By Cristina Gonzalez

Roughly 4 million Americans are living with chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection, which can lead to serious liver damage—and Latinos aren't immune. Currently, Latinos account for 1 million of those HCV infections, and the numbers keep rising.

A new public health campaign, "Tune In to Hep C," is hoping to slow those numbers down. Founded by Merck and the American Liver Foundation, the campaign focuses on educating people about chronic hepatitis C, especially in the Latino community. To help them, they've recruited Cuban-American Grammy Award–winning singer and songwriter Jon Secada. He shares with us his personal story of hepatitis C and why he wants to help all Latinos find their way to health.

Tell us about your history with hepatitis C.
My father passed away from cirrhosis of the liver in 2011. It was the result of a complication from a chronic hepatitis C infection that went untreated. He never gave his chronic hepatitis C the attention it required and did not follow up with his doctor promptly. By the time he realized how serious it was, it was too late. Like many Latinos, my family is very close, but we've never talked much about our health. Now knowing what I know now about this potentially serious disease, I wish we had.

Before my father passed away, I knew little about chronic hepatitis C, and I wish there had been more information available to my family when my father was first diagnosed. At the time, if I had really understood how serious chronic hepatitis C could be, I would have fought harder to get my father to seek help.

Why did you want to be a part of this campaign?
Chronic hepatitis C disproportionately affects Latinos. I wanted to help raise awareness of this potentially serious disease among my own community. My father lived with his condition for at least 20 years and never mentioned how sick he was getting. Before he died, I talked with him about joining this public awareness campaign, and he wanted me to share our family's story.

We both agreed it was important to share our message: Don’t wait to take action. Talk to your doctor so you know your options. Talk to your family because they want to be there for you. And, if you know someone living with chronic hepatitis C, urge them to do something about their diagnosis. Now, it’s too late to help him, but it’s not too late to help someone else.

What do you hope to accomplish with the campaign?
We want to educate people about chronic hepatitis C and the importance of taking action. The campaign was founded because, although chronic hepatitis C care is advancing, public understanding of the disease isn’t moving at nearly the same pace. Especially when you consider that many people infected with chronic hepatitis C do not know that they have the disease—approximately 70 to 80 percent of people newly infected with the disease do not have symptoms. We hope this campaign motivates others to tell their friends and family about their diagnosis and to talk to their health care provider about their options.

What are you most looking forward to with this campaign?
The fact that this campaign ties in music with a health message is really unique. As a singer-songwriter, my music is my voice, and my message is one that needs to be shared—you can’t be silent with a silent disease. You have the power to do something about it.

What do you want Latinos to know about hepatitis C?
Chronic hepatitis C is a silent disease that disproportionately affects Latinos. Of the approximately 4 million Americans living with the disease, an estimated 1 million are Latino. Yet, Latinos are less likely than non-Hispanic whites to be tested for chronic hepatitis C, even when there are known risk factors. With this virus, if you don’t take care of yourself, you won’t be able take care of those who depend on you. No matter how strong you are, no one should feel alone with disease.

What do you want Latinos to know about health?
It is so important to keep up with your health and not take it for granted. My father did not understand the potential consequences of chronic hepatitis C, and it cost him and our family dearly. If you think you may be at risk for a disease, don’t wait like my father did—talk to your doctor today about your options and ask for support from your loved ones.

To learn more about hepatitis C, check out hepmag.com. To learn more about the campaign, log on to tuneintohepc.com or hepatitisctocaeltema.com.

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