

# THE PIONEER NEWS

## Rising injection drug use sparks Hepatitis C cases

Your Health/By Dr. Praveen Arla and Andrea Renfrow

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Injection drug use, especially heroin, is skyrocketing in the United States, and among the many disastrous consequences is an increase in people infected with Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that can cause liver disease, cirrhosis, cancer, and death. For some people, infection may cause a short illness. However, 70-85% of people with Hepatitis C go on to develop chronic infection.

Hepatitis C is most commonly spread by sharing a drug needle. The virus is very infectious and easily spread through contact with contaminated surfaces, where it can survive for up to three weeks.

An estimated 3.2 million people in the United States are living with chronic Hepatitis C, and each year there are about 17,000 new cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The disease kills more than 15,000 people a year in the United States.

The CDC in a May 2015 study looked at rates of injection drug use and Hepatitis C infection in Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia and Tennessee. Those states had a 364 percent rise in Hep C infection among people ages 12 to 29 in the period from 2006 to 2012. Kentucky has the highest rate of HCV infection in the United States.

Among those in the study who discussed their risk profile, 73 percent said they had used intravenous drugs, especially heroin.

The study reported similar findings in other states including Wisconsin and Massachusetts and points to a troubling trend of Hepatitis C infections rising in step with injection drug use.

In 2013, Kentucky had the highest rate of acute Hepatitis C in the nation at 5.1 cases per 100,000 population.

Between 2010 and 2013, Hepatitis C rates in Kentucky doubled with the highest numbers found in urban areas.

However rates are increasing in rural areas.

While testing is recommended for baby boomers, young adults have been particularly impacted. In 2014, half of all acute Hepatitis C cases in Kentucky were among people 21-30 years of age.

About three-quarters of people with Hepatitis C don't feel sick or know they are infected. Even so, they are at risk for serious liver disease such as cancer or liver failure.

These can take years to show symptoms but can be fatal.

During that time, people can spread the virus. Hep C infection also puts people at greater risk of catching HIV.

There are new medications that can cure Hep C, but they are extremely expensive (\$80,000 to \$100,000 for a course of treatment).

Doctors and insurers will generally not provide them unless a person has been off heroin and other drugs for at least six months.

Protect yourself and others by knowing your risk.

The bottom line is that it is important to avoid risky behaviors, especially injecting drugs, and to get tested for Hepatitis C to keep yourself and others healthy.

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