



Department of Health

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Dear Colleague:

The nation's opioid epidemic is fueling an increase in the number of new acute hepatitis C infections in the United States (U.S.). Injection drug use (IDU) is the most common risk factor for hepatitis C infection. An estimated 30% to 70% of people who inject drugs (PWID) are infected with hepatitis C, depending on frequency and duration of use.^{1,2} The purpose of this letter is to inform providers of the relationship between the opioid crisis and the rise in new hepatitis C cases in the U.S. and in New York State (NYS) and to inform providers of the steps they can take to prevent new infections.

According to CDC, between 2010 and 2015, the number of new hepatitis C infections reported to CDC nearly tripled. The greatest increases, and the highest overall number of cases, were among young people aged 20-29, with injection drug use as the primary route of transmission.³ In December, the CDC released new research that links hepatitis C cases with injection of opiates, both prescription and heroin.⁴ The study found a simultaneous, substantial increase in acute hepatitis C incidence and drug treatment admission related to opiate injection from 2004 to 2014. Admissions to drug treatment programs for patients who inject opioids increased by 93%, while acute hepatitis C infections rose in parallel by 133%. The sharpest increases in new hepatitis C cases were among persons aged 18- 29 - a 400% rise over the ten-year period.

In NYS, since 2004, there has been a shift in the distribution of reported hepatitis C cases from persons aged 40-60 years to a younger cohort of persons aged 20-40 years.⁵ Outside of NYC, there has been a 75% increase in reported cases of acute hepatitis C from 2015 to 2016. In 2016, most (82%) of all acute hepatitis C cases were among persons aged 20-39; 51% were female and 86% had a history of IDU.⁶ Recent increases of hepatitis C among PWID are occurring in suburban and rural areas.

The new direct acting anti-viral therapies for the treatment of hepatitis C make it possible to eliminate the disease. However, elimination is not possible without timely hepatitis C screening, diagnosis and linkage to care. Treating hepatitis C among PWID may be one of the most effective HCV prevention interventions. Recent studies have shown that PWID can be treated safely and effectively with the new HCV medications, and treatment adherence and cure rates are similar in PWID when compared to non-IDU.^{7,8} There are also relatively low rates of reinfection among treated PWID.⁹

To control the rise in new hepatitis C infections:

- Be aware of the impact of the opioid epidemic within your community and screen appropriately for hepatitis C.
- Offer hepatitis C screening to all persons with current and former history of drug use and others at risk, including persons infected with HIV and persons with recognized exposures.
- Ensure timely linkage and access to hepatitis C care and treatment for all persons diagnosed with hepatitis C infection.
- Educate patients of the risks associated with injection drug use and hepatitis C infection.
- Incorporate harm reduction principles and practices across the care continuum.
- Report all new cases of hepatitis C to the local health department.

We hope this information is helpful to you, and we thank you for your work to prevent, treat, and cure hepatitis C in NYS.

Sincerely,



Johanne E. Morne, MS
Director
AIDS Institute



Nora K. Yates
Director
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Resources

The NYS Department of Health AIDS Institute's clinical guideline - Treatment of Chronic HCV Infection with Direct-Acting Antivirals - is available at: <https://www.hivguidelines.org/hcv-infection/>

Hepatitis C educational materials are currently available free of charge through the NYS Department of Health AIDS Institute. The materials and order form are available at: http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/hepatitis/hepatitis_c/providers/educational_materials.htm

Additional information on reporting of communicable disease, including hepatitis C can be found at: www.health.ny.gov/professionals/diseases/reporting/communicable

Additional information on HCV prevention, screening, care and treatment can be found at: www.health.ny.gov/hepatitis

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