

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is an infection caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which can cause liver scarring (cirrhosis), liver disease, liver cancer, and death. It ranges in severity from a mild illness, lasting a few weeks (acute), to a serious long-term (chronic) illness. Hepatitis C is the leading cause for liver transplants in the United States. In 2005, chronic liver disease was the 9th leading cause of death in California; more than 2,200 liver cancer deaths were expected in California in 2009. An estimated 600,000 persons in California have been exposed to HCV, with approximately 475,000 chronically infected (this does not include people incarcerated or homeless). Most people with hepatitis C do not know they are infected.

Transmission

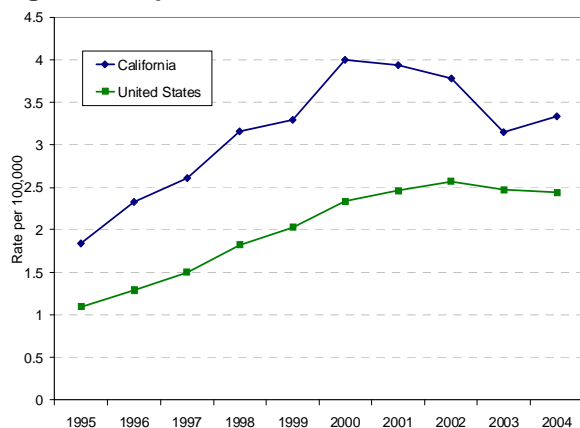
Hepatitis C is spread when blood from a person infected with the Hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. Most people become infected with the Hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before 1992, when widespread screening of the blood supply began in the United States, Hepatitis C was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. HCV can be transmitted through sexual contact and from mother-to-child during childbirth; but the risk for both of these methods of transmission is low. However, engaging in rough sex, having sex with multiple partners, or having HIV appears to increase the risk of acquiring hepatitis C.

HCV is the most common chronic bloodborne infection in the United States because approximately 75–85% of people who become infected with the Hepatitis C virus develop chronic infection.

Health Impacts in California

- Hepatitis C disproportionately affects injection drug users, African-Americans, Latinos, and people born during 1945 to 1964.
- Hepatitis C-related deaths in California more than doubled from 503 in 1995 to 1,195 in 2004; the rate of HCV-related deaths in California exceeds the national average (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hepatitis C-Related Deaths in California and the United States, 1995-2004



- 18 percent of patients at the Veterans Affairs clinics in San Francisco have HCV; nearly 30 percent of homeless veterans in Los Angeles have HCV.
- Approximately 34 percent of people incarcerated in California State prisons have HCV.
- Nearly half (45 percent) of young injection drug users and most (70 to 85 percent) older injection drug users in San Francisco have HCV.
- More than 85 percent of clients of one methadone maintenance treatment program in Sacramento have HCV.

Economic Burden to California

- Hospitalizations for patients with HCV-related liver disease, liver cancer, and liver transplants cost more than \$1.5 billion in 2007. At least 73 percent of these expenditures were publicly funded.
- Indirect health care costs among patients with HCV range from \$50 to \$888 million per year.