

## **HEPATITIS C VIRUS IN WASHINGTON STATE**

Department of Health, Infectious Disease and Reproductive Health

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Hepatitis C (HCV) is emerging as a major public health concern in Washington State. Infection is chronic and lifelong for up to 85% of individuals who acquire the virus and of those chronically infected, 70% will develop liver disease. Nationwide, 10,000 deaths are attributed to HCV each year; this number is expected to triple over the next 20 years.

### **What is hepatitis C?**

- Hepatitis C is a virus that causes inflammation of the liver. It is the most common blood borne infection in the United States.
- Hepatitis C infection can lead to cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. It is the most common cause, after alcohol, of chronic liver disease, and the most frequent reason for a liver transplant.

### **How many people are affected in Washington State?**

- An estimated 110,000 people are infected with hepatitis C in Washington State.
- Of these, about 70,000 will develop chronic infection.
- Approximately 15,000 may develop cirrhosis within 20 years.
- As many as 1,000 may develop liver cancer within 20 years.
- About 250 deaths occur each year as a result of hepatitis C infection.

### **How is hepatitis C spread?**

- HCV is spread by exposure to infected blood or contaminated injection equipment.
- Before 1992, the most common way it was spread was by transfusion with contaminated blood. Since 1992, donated blood is screened for HCV.
- Currently, the most common way it is spread is by the sharing of injection drug use equipment.
- Much less common is transmission from mother-to-infant at or near the time of birth or through sexual contact.

### **Who is at risk of contracting hepatitis C?**

- Persons who received transplants, transfusions or other blood products before July 1992.
- Persons who inject illegal drugs (Injecting drug users account for about 60-80% of all new HCV infections).
- Those who received clotting factors before 1987 for hemophilia or organ transplants.
- Those who get tattoos, body piercing and other body art in unsterile environments.
- Infants born to HCV-infected women, especially when the mother is co-infected with HIV.
- Those who have sexual contact with an infected person or have a history of high-risk sexual practices (please note that sexual transmission of HCV is low).

### **What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?**

- Loss of appetite, stomach pain, nausea and vomiting may occur 40-180 days after contact.
- Most people never experience symptoms so they are not aware that they are infected with HCV.

### **How is it treated?**

- Drugs like interferon and ribavirin are licensed for the treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis C.
- Treatment is effective in only about 20-50% of persons, depending on a variety of factors.
- Treatments are costly; significant side effects include depression, nausea, and lowered blood counts.

### **Can HCV infection be prevented?**

- Unlike other types of viral hepatitis, there is no effective vaccine for the prevention of hepatitis C.

- Current programs targeting groups at risk for HCV infection are limited in scope, and there is no funding for a coordinated, statewide effort for screening and education.

### **What is the Department of Health (DOH) doing about hepatitis C infection?**

- In 2004, DOH and its partners created a Strategic Plan to address education, training and management of HCV.
- Training courses are offered for providers and outreach workers.
- Public information and resource referral are available through the STD/HIV hotlines.
- HCV infection was added to the list of conditions that providers must report to DOH in December 2000. However, the department has received no additional resources to implement the surveillance activities needed to analyze the epidemic, assess the impact and target prevention efforts.

### **Are other agencies affected?**

- Washington State Department of Veteran Affairs: about 10% of veterans treated at veteran hospitals nationwide are infected with HCV and Vietnam War-era veterans make up 63% of those. Actual numbers of infected veterans is not known because only a small percentage have been tested.
- Washington State Department of Corrections: about 25% of offenders entering the Department of Corrections system have evidence of HCV infection. Cost and safety of staff are issues for Corrections.
- Washington State Department of Labor and Industries: occupational safety issues for health care and public safety workers. There will be cost impacts for occupational injury claim and occupational exposure incident under Industrial Insurance Laws.
- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services: agency impacts from high prevalence of drug and alcohol use and mental health problems among those infected, and from infants born to infected women. Cost to the Medical Assistance Administration (MAA) is unknown at this time.

### **What needs to be done to reduce the impact and cost of HCV in Washington?**

- Funding to implement a comprehensive HCV prevention and control program is an urgent and unmet statewide need.
- Infrastructure for chronic hepatitis C surveillance is needed to assess the epidemiology of the epidemic, including trends in affected populations, as well as morbidity and mortality. This information will allow DOH to assess the impact of the epidemic and develop targeted prevention efforts.
- Comprehensive education of the public and providers are needed to reduce risk and improve outcomes.
- Publicly funded counseling, testing, expanded harm reduction and rehabilitation are needed for drug users.
- Enhanced access to diagnosis, treatment and care services are needed for those infected with HCV.

### **What are your sources for this information?**

*Recommendations for Prevention and Control of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) Infection and HCV-Related Chronic Disease, MMWR October 1998; Estimating Future Hepatitis C Morbidity, Mortality, and Costs in the United States, Wong et al., American Journal of Public Health, October 2000; Chronic Hepatitis C: Current Disease Management, National Institutes of Health Publication #99-423, November 2001; Washington State Medical Association, May 2001; Report on the Management of Hepatitis C in the Correctional Environment, Report to the Legislature, State of Washington Department of Corrections, December 1999.*

### **Are there web sites with more information about HCV?**

For more information, contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis> or check out the DOH Viral Hepatitis webpage at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/hepatitis>

### **Who should I contact for more information?**

You may contact the Infectious Disease and Reproductive Health Program at (360) 236-3440 or the Hepatitis Hotline at 1-866-917-4HEP.