Cincinnati Hospitals Report Rising Hepatitis C Rates Among Local Children

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Hospitals in Cincinnati are currently documenting a rise in hepatitis C virus (HCV) among babies and kids. It's another worrying sign of the local heroin epidemic, say doctors, who also note that today, there is no standard HCV treatment plan for children, Cincinnati.com reports.

In 2009, the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center saw 16 children who were either considered to be at risk for hepatitis C or currently living with the virus. By 2015, that number had climbed to 88. What's more, doctors say many more children in the area are likely to be undiagnosed, especially since there is no accurate way to test for hepatitis C in newborns.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that today there is no universal testing for hepatitis C among pregnant women in the United States. Identifying and tracking the youngest individuals among the HCV-positive population is also often difficult, as many are the children of current and former injection drug users, who may not be connected to health care.

If a mother has hepatitis C, she has a 5 to 10 percent chance of passing the virus on to her child during birth or pregnancy. Most babies and children clear the virus without needing treatment. But for those who don't, it's a waiting game. There is currently no next-generation hepatitis C treatment approved for children.

But Cincinnati Children's is making moves to come up with a strategy to treat children. In April, the hospital began tracking babies of mothers identified as hep C-positive and is also making bigger steps to identify more at-risk babies. A team of specialists at the hospital is also leading ongoing clinical trials for hep C treatment in children. The studies use the same drugs used in adults, and so far, researchers say the trials have gone well.

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