Hepatitis C Testing, Treatment Fell in the Early Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Positive diagnostic tests and drug prescriptions dropped 40% in July 2020 compared with earlier years.

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The early months of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a decrease in routine testing and treatment for hepatitis C, according to study results published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

“This analysis adds to other studies that demonstrate that lack of access to testing and care in 2020 during the height of the pandemic means many individuals did not receive important diagnostic test[s] and screenings,” Harvey Kaufman, MD, of Quest Diagnostics, said in a press release.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), some 50,300 acute hepatitis C cases were reported in 2018. Between 2013 and 2016, around 2.4 million people in the United States were living with hepatitis C.

Currently, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends hepatitis C screening for adults between ages 18 and 79 as well as for women during pregnancy. The CDC also recommends screening for all adults at least once in their lifetime and for women during each pregnancy.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has impeded access to regular testing and care for hepatitis C. This could result in people unknowingly spreading the virus as well as people being diagnosed with the virus at later stages of the disease, contributing to more advanced liver disease and higher death rates.

Researchers from the CDC and Quest Diagnostics assessed hepatitis C testing numbers from January through July 2020 in comparison with the same months in 2018 and 2019. They used data from a large national reference clinical laboratory, including the average number of total and positive hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody tests as well as positive HCV RNA tests. Antibody tests reveal whether a person has ever had the virus, while RNA tests reveal current active infection. The researchers also took into account national estimates of direct-acting antiviral drugs for hepatitis C treatment that were dispensed during the same periods.

During April 2020, antibody testing for hepatitis C dropped by 59% in comparison with April 2018 and April 2019. Thereafter, testing volume rose, with only a 6% drop seen in July 2020 compared with previous years.

The number of positive hepatitis C RNA tests, indicative of active infection, dramatically decreased by 62% in March 2020 and by 39% in July 2020 compared with earlier years.

When looking at antiviral therapy use in 2020, the researchers found that drug prescriptions fell by 43% in May, 37% in June and 38% in July, compared with 2018 and 2019.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, continued public health messaging, interventions and outreach programs to restore HCV testing and treatment to pre-pandemic levels, and maintenance of public health efforts to eliminate hepatitis C infections remain important,” wrote the researchers.

Click here to read the study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

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