Hepatitis C–Positive Organ Transplants Are on the Rise

In the first five months of 2018, 803 HCV-positive organs were transplanted across the United States.

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Now that new hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatments promise cure rates upward of 90 percent for those infected, doctors are increasingly considering organs infected with the liver virus. According to a recent report from the Chicago Tribune, HCV-positive organ transplants are on the rise across the country.

According to recent statistics from the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), the nonprofit that runs the nation's transplant system, 803 organs used in transplants in the first five months of 2018 had tested positive for hepatitis C, compared with just 482 hepatitis C–positive organs used in transplants in all of 2013. Last year, 1,491 of the 37,795 organs used in transplants were HCV positive. This year, doctors are well on track to surpass that record figure.

Transplant specialists say the availability of organs from donors with hepatitis C appears to be easing the chronic shortage of organs that has long affected prospective transplant patients across the country. More than 114,000 patients are on waiting lists for organs—and the influx and viability of transplanting HCV-positive organs means far fewer organs will be discarded because of disease.

The increase in available organs is also the result, in part, of the nation's ongoing opioid epidemic. A sharp rise in injection drug use, hepatitis C infection and overdose deaths among young, otherwise healthy Americans means there are far more HCV-positive organs available for transplant than ever before.

So what happens when transplant patients receive an HCV-positive organ? Over the past few years, many state Medicaid agencies and some commercial insurers have begun lifting restrictions for access to HCV treatment, meaning many patients can receive treatment soon after their transplant to cure the infection. Several transplant hospitals also help cover the expense for HCV treatment, sometimes with the help of donations.

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