Hepatitis C-Related Deaths Quadruple Across Rhode Island

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A new report via the Rhode Island Public Health Institute shows a rapid increase in new diagnoses, hospitalizations and deaths from hepatitis C virus (HCV) over the last 10 years. The report, published last week by the Rhode Island Department of Health, now estimates that nearly 2 percent of the state's population is infected, nearly double the national average, WPRI reports.

The study, which took information from official surveillance statistics, hospitalization and discharge data across the state, estimates that between 16,603 and 22,660 Rhode Islanders are currently living with hepatitis C. According to new information from the state's Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Rhode Island Medicaid and the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, deaths related to the liver virus have also nearly quadrupled in the state over the last 10 years, rising from 25 in 2005 to 102 in 2014.

The Rhode Island Department of Health is now calling for all baby boomers (those born between 1945 and 1965)—as well as anyone considered to be at high risk for infection—to get tested for HCV. Those at high risk include people who have used injection drugs and those who received blood transfusions prior to 1992, the year widespread screening for hepatitis C in the U.S. blood supply was instated.

The report also notes that Rhode Island is currently in the midst of a syndemic of HCV, opioid dependence and overdose. (A syndemic is a set of linked health problems contributing to an excess burden of disease in a particular population.) Currently, Rhode Island ranks sixth in the nation for most drug overdose deaths; the rise in hepatitis C is thought to be closely linked to this injection-drug-using population.

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