New Hepatitis C Diagnoses Span Multiple Generations

The CDC calls for everyone to be tested and for all pregnant women to be tested during every pregnancy.

April 9, 2020 By Benjamin Ryan

Whereas hepatitis C virus (HCV) was once primarily seen among members of the baby boom generation—those born between 1945 and 1965—the opioid epidemic has driven up new cases among younger individuals over the past decade. Today, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), new diagnoses of the virus occur in substantial numbers across multiple adult generations.

On Thursday, April 9, the CDC issued new surveillance data regarding the U.S. hep C epidemic in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

The federal health agency is calling for a one-time hep C test for all adults age 18 years and older and all pregnant women during every pregnancy. For those who have ongoing risk factors for the virus, the CDC recommends routine testing.

“The hepatitis C epidemic has changed, and so should the nation’s testing guidelines,” Jonathan Mermin, MD, MPH, director of CDC’s National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention, said in a press release. “CDC wants all of us to get tested and get cured.”

Hep C is readily curable with direct-acting antivirals, which typically require six to 12 weeks of treatment, have cure rates in the high 90% range and are highly tolerable.

Risk factors for HCV include the sharing of injection-drug syringes, needles and other equipment; mother-to-child transmission during pregnancy or delivery; and condomless sex between men.

The CDC estimates that between 2013 and 2016, about 2.4 million people were living with HCV in the United States. In 2018, HCV was listed as an underlying or contributing cause of death for 15,000 people.

In 2018, about 50,300 people acquired hep C, four times the number of people estimated to have contracted the virus in 2009.

Between 2009 and 2018, injection drug use, particularly of opioids, drove up new hep C infections dramatically among people in their 20s and 30s.

In 2018, 36.5% of new HCV diagnoses were among millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996), 23.1% were among Generation Xers (those born between 1966 and 1980) and 36.3% were among baby boomers.

Between 2015 and 2018, just 61% of the estimated population of people living with hep C were aware of their infection.

“The opioid crisis shifted the course of the hepatitis C epidemic in less than a decade,” said Mermin. “There are nearly 1 million Americans with hepatitis C who don’t know they have it. This is a curable disease—no one should have to look back knowing something as simple as a blood test could have changed their life or the life of their loved one.”

To read the CDC report, click here.

To read the CDC screening recommendations, click here.

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