Telemedicine Program Successfully Treats Hep C in Inmates

Telemedicine is increasingly in use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

June 3, 2020 By Benjamin Ryan

Researchers found that a telemedicine program was highly successful as a means of treating hepatitis C virus (HCV) in a large number of incarcerated individuals, who achieved a high cure rate, Healio reports.

As described in a virtual presentation for the Digestive Disease Week meeting, researchers developed a telehealth HCV referral, assessment and treatment protocol for providing direct-acting antiviral (DAA) therapy to inmates held at facilities run by the Virginia Department of Corrections.

Telemedicine is increasingly in use during the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to protect patients from exposure to the new coronavirus and reduce the demand on health care systems.

The investigators followed the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases and Infectious Diseases Society of America HCV treatment guidelines.

Between June and October 2019, they assessed 872 inmates, 672 of whom completed DAA treatment. The program saw participants before they started treatment, four weeks into their treatment, at the end of treatment and 12 weeks after that.

Before starting people with advanced liver fibrosis (scarring) on DAA treatment, the investigators gave them an ultrasound to rule out hepatocellular carcinoma, the most common form of liver cancer.

Ninety-two percent of the participants were being treated for hep C for the first time. Eighty percent had advanced fibrosis. Most of the participants received 12 weeks of DAA treatment, and 25% received ribavirin in addition to their DAA regimen.

Ninety-seven percent of the participants achieved a sustained virologic response 12 weeks after completing therapy, considered a cure. There was no association between the cure rate and participants' age, sex, race, HIV status, fibrosis level, HCV genotype, use of ribavirin, prior experience with HCV treatment or the length of their DAA treatment.

“Treating HCV in prisons through telemedicine offers the opportunity to treat high-risk patients,” presenter Taseen A. Syed, MD, of Virginia Commonwealth University, concluded.

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