



Living With Liver Disease

Veterans and Hepatitis C

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), hepatitis C has been a significant health concern among veterans. As of September 2021, the VA reported that approximately 174,000 veterans in their care had been diagnosed with chronic hepatitis C. Thanks to extensive and aggressive outreach and treatment program implemented by the VA, more than 100,000 Veterans with chronic HCV infection have been cured since 2014. At the end of 2018, almost 85% of Veterans at increased risk for HCV had been tested, compared with 50% of the general U.S. population. In 2019, it was estimated that fewer than 25,000 Veterans in VA care remain to be tested for HCV.

Veterans with the highest risks for hepatitis C are those who served during the Vietnam War era, have alcohol or substance use disorders, have been homeless, or have a history of mental illness. In a national VHA survey of those who tested positive for hep C:

- 64 percent were Vietnam veterans
- 5 percent were post-Vietnam veterans
- 5 percent were Korean War veterans
- 2 percent were post-Korean War veterans
- 1 percent were veterans from other periods of service

For many years, there was controversy over the military's use of jet guns for immunizations. Also called air guns, multi-use-nozzle jet injectors are needleless medical devices that use high-pressure fluid to penetrate the skin. Multiple published studies have demonstrated that jet injectors have the capacity to transmit significant amounts of blood and with it, the potential to transmit blood-borne pathogens. For many years, the VHA denied knowledge of hepatitis C transmission via jet guns. The most updated response by the VHA is:

"Although there have been no case reports of hepatitis C being transmitted by a jet gun injection, it is biologically plausible. Any veteran enrolled in the VA health care system who has concerns about hepatitis C infection, because of jet gun injectors, other blood exposure during military service, any of several risk factors, or for any other reason, is welcome and encouraged to request testing for hepatitis C at his or her nearest VA hospital."

Note that in addition to jet injectors, if you were ever exposed to blood during military service, testing is recommended. Service personnel are exposed to blood in multiple ways, including blood splatter, helping the wounded, handling dead bodies, receiving blood transfusions and during medical procedures. Veterans who receive medical care outside the VHA should tell their community medical providers if they have ever been exposed to blood.

The VHA has made great strides to improve health care to veterans, especially for those with hep C. For more information, the [VHA viral hepatitis website](#) is an excellent resource. If you feel that you are not adequately supported by the VHA, contact [HCV Vets](#).

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<http://beta.docker.hepmag.com/basics/liver-health/veterans>