

HIV cases reaching 'epidemic' scale in Greece: officials

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HIV infection among crisis-hit Greece's drug users is reaching "epidemic" proportions with recorded cases marking a 35-fold increase from 2010, health experts warned Friday.

A Greek study found 487 HIV-positive cases among intravenous drug users in the first ten months of the year compared with 206 in 2011 and 10 to 14 in 2010, a trend blamed on the country's two-year [economic crisis](#).

"The growing increase in the incidence of HIV in Greece during the last two years is assuming epidemic proportions" mainly among such users, a group of senior [health experts](#) said on the eve of World AIDS Day on Saturday.

"Since 2008 intravenous drug users have faced unprecedented conditions of poverty which, have led them to using adulterated or [novel drugs](#), resulting in a large increase in intravenous use and the use of contaminated needles and syringes," the experts told a national conference on public health.

Officials monitoring the issue include the European centre for [disease prevention](#) and control (ECDC), the university of Athens medical school, the state organisation against drugs and the centre for disease control.

The outbreak is currently limited to Athens, where an estimated 3,000 people inject drugs, they said.

"Given the magnitude of the ongoing outbreak, concerted action is needed to expand needle and syringe programmes in Athens," said ECDC director Mark Spenger.

"If a scale-up is not achieved, it is likely that [HIV transmission](#) among people who inject drugs in Athens will continue and even accelerate," he said.

The study presented on Friday also found that 19 percent of Greek drug users and 24 percent of migrant users were HIV-positive.

Over 30 percent of homeless people in the past year were also positive.

Greece has drastically cut its health budget and social support programmes amid a broader scale-back of public expenses over the last two years, a policy designed to reduce the country's debt and secure EU-IMF bailout loans.

But Spenger noted: "The cost of prevention ... will be significantly less than the provision of treatment to those who become infected."

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