

Urban ERs see high rates of hepatitis C infection

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An urban emergency department that set up a hepatitis C testing protocol saw high rates of infection among intravenous drug users and Baby Boomers, with three-quarters of those testing positive unaware they were infected. The results of a screening and diagnostic testing program for hepatitis C were reported online Tuesday in *Annals of Emergency Medicine*.

"Given skyrocketing rates of injection heroin use around the country, we expect the already [high rates](#) of hepatitis C infection to explode," said lead study author Douglas White, MD, of Highland Hospital, Alameda Health System in Oakland, Calif. "Intervention by emergency departments, in the form of screening and referral for treatment, could help slow the spread of this potentially deadly, communicable disease."

Researchers tested 10 percent of [emergency department](#) patients for hepatitis C virus (HCV), mostly but not exclusively focusing testing on those considered high-risk, such as intravenous drug users, Baby Boomers and patients with unspecified liver disease. Of patients tested, 10.3 percent tested positive for HCV, with 70 percent of those confirmed as chronically infected. Only 24 percent of patients who tested positive for the virus had prior knowledge of HCV infection.

Hepatitis C virus is the most common chronic blood-borne infection in the U.S., affecting an estimated 3 million people and is a leading cause of end-stage liver disease, liver cancer and liver transplants. It is estimated that HCV prevalence in the United States among people born

between 1945 and 1965 (the "Baby Boom") is as high as 4 percent. Baby Boomers account for 75 percent of people living with HCV infection and as many as 1.75 million of them do not know they are infected.

"In addition to the myriad public health functions they already perform, urban emergency departments may play an important role as safety net providers for HCV screening," said Dr. White. "We have a better than even chance of reaching many of the three million people who are infected since they tend to be heavy emergency department users already. It gives us a chance to connect these people to ongoing care at HCV clinics or elsewhere in the health care system."

More information: Results of a Rapid Hepatitis C Virus Screening and Diagnostic Testing Program in an Urban Emergency Department, [www.annemergmed.com/article/S0 ... \(15\)00529-6/fulltext](http://www.annemergmed.com/article/S0... (15)00529-6/fulltext)

Provided by American College of Emergency Physicians

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