

The push to eliminate hepatitis C

May 17 2023, by Ariana Baldassano



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Why does the White House want to put \$11.3 billion toward eliminating hepatitis C? Because as many as 75% of people who have it don't know it.

Nearly a decade after the FDA approved the first antiviral pill to cure

hepatitis C, people most likely won't know they have the virus until it becomes dangerous. And while the government's goal of eliminating it by 2030 may seem ambitious, a RUSH hepatologist says with access to treatments, education and a little personal advocacy, it is within reach.

"Any step forward in policy and access is favorable," says Nancy Reau, MD. "We need to get clinicians and [policy makers](#) to really work on the policy for this. It's one thing to have clinicians and [patients](#) who are trying their best, only to have a policy that slows progress."

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a curable liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus, commonly called HCV. People born between 1945 and 1965 are likely to have been exposed to the virus before anyone really knew what hepatitis C was—and before there were antivirals to help manage it. Before proper infection control protections were adopted, routine medical and dental procedures were a common way for people to become infected.

Now, hepatitis C is typically contracted by sharing needles or other equipment used to prepare or inject drugs, or through unsafe tattooing practices. The virus also can be passed from a mother to her child during pregnancy.

Hepatitis C is hard to identify and treat in its early stages because it rarely causes symptoms. If it goes untreated, the virus can cause more damage to the liver, which could lead to [liver cancer](#) or [liver failure](#). By the time symptoms start to arise, they can include [abdominal pain](#), dark urine, fatigue, jaundice, loss of appetite and nausea or vomiting.

Treating hepatitis C

Treatment typically involves a round of antiviral medication to help clear the virus from the body. In 2013, sofosbuvir was the first antiviral pill approved by the FDA to cure hepatitis C. It has made treatment more accessible and less burdensome. Instead of weekly injections, patients now can take pills once a day for eight to 12 weeks with minimal side effects.

"We really do think this has been a game-changer in why there's a strong emphasis on identifying patients," Reau says. "Hepatitis C could be eliminated with these efforts."

The White House's proposed \$11.3 billion allotment would expand rapid diagnostic testing and access to proven treatment. Reau says if it's approved by Congress, the funding could make a big difference.

"A lot of the funding that's going to go behind hepatitis C is going to allow us to concentrate on some of these efforts not only in identifying those who don't know they have hepatitis C, but also those who have been diagnosed but not cured."

Advocate for yourself and your care

Reau encourages patients to advocate for themselves by asking their clinicians about [hepatitis C](#) and pushing for treatment if they out you have the [virus](#).

"It is a curable disease, so you really want to empower individuals to try and follow that care pathway," Reau says.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

Citation: The push to eliminate hepatitis C (2023, May 17) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-hepatitis.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.