



Hepatitis C in Wisconsin: Focus on Young People who Inject Drugs

Background

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is an infectious virus that is spread through contact with blood, traditionally via contaminated needles/syringes or blood transfusions. In recent years, the spread of the virus through persons who inject drugs (PWID) is the primary concern. It is estimated that PWID are infected within the first few years of injecting drugs and are often less than 30 years old. A recent resurgence in heroin use across the nation further exacerbates the number of people injecting drugs, and consequently, higher rates of HCV.

Strong evidence supports the link between injecting equipment, including syringes and “works” (cottons, filters, vials), and HCV transmission:

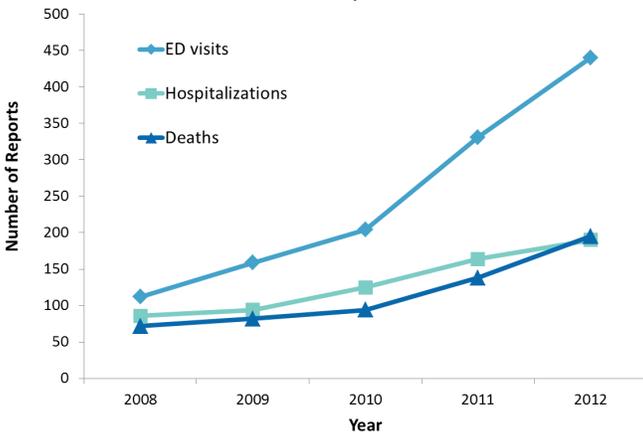
- The virus can remain in syringes for up to 63 days.¹
- Used cotton swabs/pads are almost always contaminated with the virus.²
- The virus can stay infective for up to six weeks on inanimate surfaces.³

Wisconsin Trends

An increase in heroin use over the last few years has contributed to an increase in emergency department (ED) visits, hospitalizations, and overdoses (Figure 1).⁴ In Wisconsin:

- Heroin-related deaths nearly doubled between 2008 and 2011 and were highest in those aged 15-24.
- Heroin-related ED visits tripled between the years 2008 and 2012.

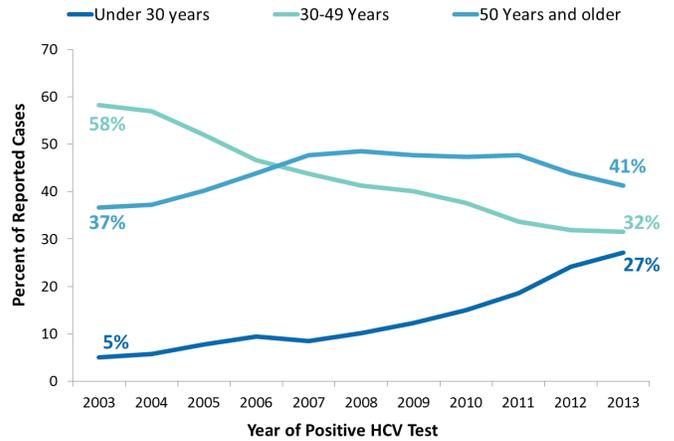
Figure 1: Number of Heroin Overdoses and Deaths in Wisconsin, 2008-2012



*Acute HCV cases differ from prevalent cases. An acute case presents as a short-term illness and represents recent infection. Prevalent cases are more likely chronic cases that were diagnosed or acquired years ago.

The rise in heroin use in young people under age 30 appears to mirror the increase in reported HCV. New cases of HCV among individuals less than 30 years old increased fivefold between 2003 and 2013.⁵

Figure 2: Percent of Reported HCV Cases, by Age, Wisconsin, 2003-2013

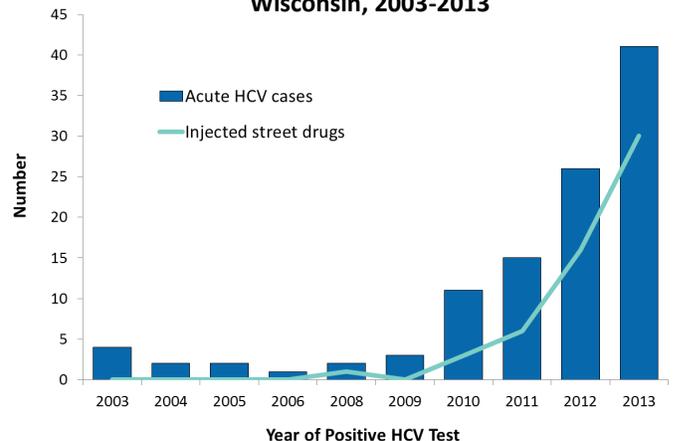


Newly reported cases among individuals <30 years old increased fivefold between 2003 and 2013.

Wisconsin surveillance documented a record number of acute HCV cases* in 2013 that nearly doubled between 2012 –2013 (Figure 3)⁵. Acute HCV cases mirror those found in young PWID:

- 70% of acute cases had a history of injection drug use.
- The average age of acute cases was 27 years old.
- 59% reported sharing drug equipment within the last six months.

Figure 3: Reported Acute HCV Cases, Wisconsin, 2003-2013



HCV Testing at Harm Reduction Sites

Between October 2012 and October 2013, harm reduction sites across the state offered a rapid HCV test that could assess whether users had been exposed to the virus. The sites also offered syringe exchange and injecting kits, along with education on hepatitis and overdose prevention. Further risk information and demographics were obtained from individuals with reactive tests, including findings that:

- 82% of HCV-positive PWID were non-Hispanic and white.
- 49% of all HCV-positive PWID were under the age of 30.
- 88% reported injecting drugs in the past six months.
- 85% of HCV-positive PWID reported ever sharing drug equipment (works); 53% in the last six months.

1 out of 2 HCV-infected users shared drug equipment (works) in the last six months.

Key Point

The growing heroin epidemic in Wisconsin and the nation is leading to more young adults sharing syringes and other drug equipment. This increase in sharing injection equipment is directly related to the increase in HCV among PWID due to the prolonged viability of the virus in drug injection equipment for weeks.

For more information regarding the Wisconsin Hepatitis Program, contact:

Sheila Guilfoyle, Viral Hepatitis Coordinator
Sheila.Guilfoyle@dhs.wisconsin.gov

Lauren Stockman, Hepatitis C Epidemiologist
Lauren.Stockman@dhs.wisconsin.gov



Wisconsin Department of Health Services
Division of Public Health
P-00857 (09/2014)
608-266-1865

What can be done?

Refer PWID to harm reduction programs for HCV testing, needle exchange, and education...

Lifepoint Needle Exchange at ARCW Locations
<http://www.arcw.org/>

AIDS Network for Testing in the Dane/Rock County Regions
<http://www.aidsnetwork.org/prevention/>

Wisconsin Referral Center
<http://www.irissoft.com/arcw/default.asp>

Refer HCV-positive PWID to health care providers or local health departments for further evaluation, including:

Symptom evaluation, liver health, and treatment options

Vaccination for hepatitis A and B

Refer PWID to AODA Treatment Centers...

A search tool for locating treatment centers is on the web at:
<http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/TreatmentLocator/faces/addressSearch.jspx?state=WI>

Additional Resources

AASLD Treatment Guidelines

<http://www.aasld.org/practiceguidelines/pages/default.aspx>

CDC Testing Guidelines

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HCV/GuidelinesC.htm>

The Epidemiologic Profile of Hepatitis C Virus in Wisconsin

<http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/P0/p00860.pdf>

References

1. Paintsil E, He H, Peters C, Lindenbach BD, Heimer R. Survival of hepatitis C virus in syringes: implication for transmission among injection drug users. *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 2010;202:984-90.
2. Thibault V, Bara J-L, Nefau T, Duplessy-Garson C. Hepatitis C transmission in injection drug users: could swabs be the main culprits? *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 2011;204:1839-42.
3. Paintsil E, Binka M, Patel A, Lindenbach B, Heimer R. Hepatitis C Virus maintains infectivity for weeks after drying on inanimate surfaces at room temperature: Implications for risks of transmission. *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 2014; 209(8):1205-11.
4. Wisconsin hospital inpatient database, Wisconsin emergency department visit database, and Wisconsin resident death certificates, Office of Health Informatics, Division of Public Health, Wisconsin Department of Health Services.
5. Wisconsin Electronic Disease Surveillance System, Division of Public Health, Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Data include HCV cases reported as of 3/31/2014.