

Hepatitis C in Wisconsin: Increase Among Young People Who Inject Drugs

Wisconsin Hepatitis C Program

HCV IN WISCONSIN AND THE U.S.

In Wisconsin and the U.S., the number of people newly infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV) has increased, most notably among younger adults, as a result of the opioid epidemic and increased injection drug use.^{1, 2} HCV, a bloodborne virus, can easily be transmitted by sharing needles, syringes, and other equipment used to prepare or inject drugs, because HCV can remain infectious outside the body for several weeks, including in syringes and on inanimate surfaces.^{3, 4}

SYMPTOMS AND COMPLICATIONS

Approximately 20% of people newly infected with HCV experience symptoms of acute hepatitis, including jaundice, fatigue, abdominal pain, and poor appetite 2–26 weeks after infection. Among all people infected with HCV, more than half develop chronic infection.⁵ If untreated, chronic HCV can cause serious health problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver cancer, and even death.

HCV TRENDS IN WISCONSIN

In Wisconsin, the number of acute HCV cases has increased 142% from 2014 to 2019 (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1.

The number of acute HCV cases has increased over the past 10 years in Wisconsin, and remained high in 2019. Most reported injecting drugs.

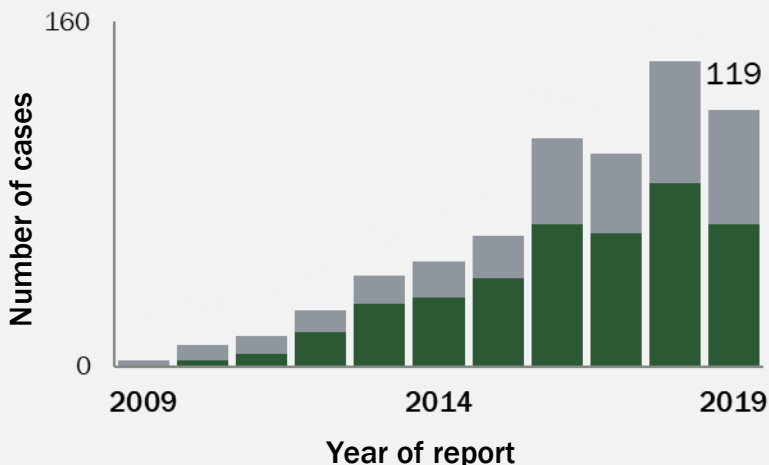
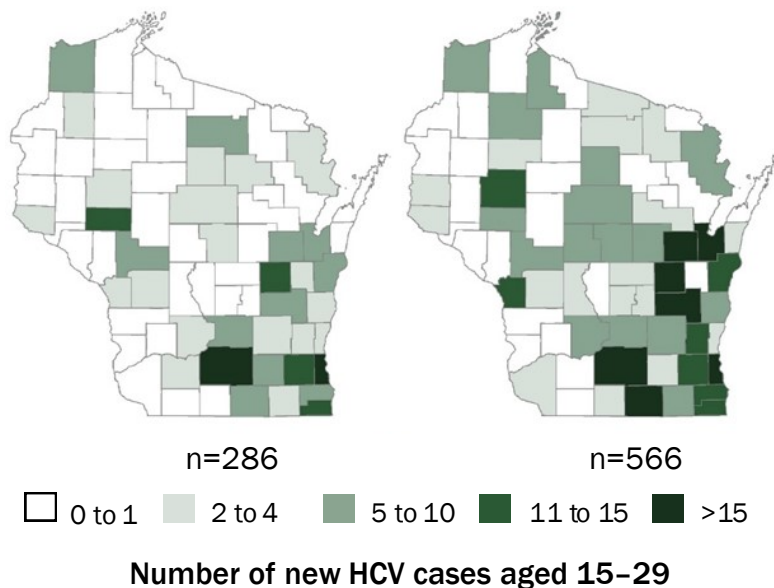


FIGURE 2.

Over the past 10 years, the number of new HCV cases among young people has nearly doubled, and more Wisconsin counties are reporting cases.



Among the 119 acute cases reported in 2019, injection drug use was the most commonly reported risk factor, 74% were under age 40, 50% were female, and 79% were non-Hispanic White.

Over the past 10 years, the number of new reports of HCV (acute and chronic) among young adults aged 15–29 years has nearly doubled, and cases are being reported from more Wisconsin counties (Figure 2). In 2019, nearly three out of every four cases newly reported with HCV in this age group were among White people, but the rate of HCV was highest among American Indian people.

HCV among women of childbearing age is concerning because infants born to women with HCV have a 6% risk of contracting HCV perinatally. Over the past 10 years in Wisconsin, the rate of women of childbearing age (15–44 years) newly reported with HCV has more than doubled. Infants born to mothers with HCV can be tested for HCV RNA as early as age 1–2 months to determine if they are infected.⁶

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Harm reduction, like syringe services programs (see resources below), helps prevent HCV infection among people who inject drugs.

HCV TREATMENT

Highly effective treatment for HCV exists and can cure HCV with an eight- to 12-week course of oral medication. As of July 2020, Wisconsin Medicaid no longer requires prior authorization, patients can receive treatment regardless of sobriety and illness severity, and all health care providers can now prescribe treatment.



Looking for more information on HCV in Wisconsin? Check out the [2019 HCV Surveillance Report](#) or the brief [two-page summary version](#).

REFERENCES

1. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Surveillance for Viral Hepatitis – United States, 2018.](#)
2. [Zibbell J.E., et al. Increases in acute hepatitis C virus infection related to a growing opioid epidemic and associated injection drug use, United States, 2004 to 2014. Am J Public Health 2018;108\(2\):175-181.](#)
3. [Paintsil E., et al. 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. [Paintsil E., et al. Survival of hepatitis C virus in syringes: implication for transmission among injection drug users. Journal of Infectious Diseases 2010;202:984-90.](#)
5. [Seo S, Silverberg MJ, Hurley LB, et al. Prevalence of Spontaneous Clearance of Hepatitis C Virus Infection Doubled From 1998 to 2017. Clin Gastroenterol Hepatol. 2020;18\(2\):511-513.](#)
6. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hepatitis C Questions and Answers for Health Professionals.](#)

HARM REDUCTION AND HCV TESTING SITES

- Lifepoint Needle Exchange at Vivent Health Wisconsin Locations
<https://viventhealth.org/prevention-testing/needle-exchange-narcan/>
- Sixteenth Street Community Health Center Needle Exchange Program
<http://sschc.org/health-community/hiv-program/prevention-and-testing/>
- Public Health Madison & Dane County Needle Exchange Program
<https://www.publichealthmdc.com/health-services/needle-exchange-hepatitis-c>

