

Vietnam Vets at Highest Risk for Hepatitis C

The VA reports that it has treated and cured nearly 100,000 veterans with hepatitis C

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Hepatitis C, also known as HCV, is a viral infection causing liver inflammation and occasionally liver damage. Less than 1 percent of the population — or roughly 3 million Americans — have chronic hepatitis C, making HCV the most common chronic blood-borne infection in the United States, according to Dr. Tamar H. Taddei, co-chair of the American Liver Foundation's National Medical Advisory Committee.

“The true prevalence of hepatitis C infection among veterans is unknown,” said Dr. David B. Ross, director of VA's HIV, Hepatitis and Related Conditions Program. “Survey data suggest that hepatitis C is more common in veterans who currently use the VA system in the U.S. population as a whole.

“The prevalence of HCV varies among veterans by era of military service, with the highest rates found in those who served in Vietnam between [the years of] 1964 to 1975.”

In addition, veterans and organizations representing them have expressed considerable interest in a possible relationship between HCV and immunizations with jet injectors, according to the VA.

“Although there has never been a documented case of hepatitis C transmitted by a jet injector, it is biologically plausible,” stated the VA website.

VA criteria for screening veterans for HCV infection consist of the following:

- Prior or current injection drug use;
- Blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992;
- Vietnam War-era veteran;
- Health-care or public-safety workers after a needle-stick injury or other exposure to HCV positive blood;

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- Individuals receiving tattoos or piercings in non-regulated settings;
- People with more than 50 lifetime sexual partners;
- Persons with HIV;
- Those treated for blood clotting prior to 1987;
- Abnormal liver function test results;
- People born to mothers with HCV;
- Sexual exposure to a partner with HCV; and
- Hemodialysis patients.

The American Liver Foundation also recommends that anyone born between 1945 and 1965 be tested for hepatitis C, regardless of other risk factors.

“The No. 1 risk factor for infection and transmission is sharing needles for injection drug use,” Taddei said.

Prevention of hepatitis C includes avoiding injection drug use, using protective equipment in health care settings and not sharing razors and toothbrushes, she added.

Since most people with hepatitis C do not have symptoms, testing at-risk individuals is especially important.

“The most important intervention is for patients to ask their health care provider to be tested for HCV,” Taddei said. “For positive patients, more than 97 percent can be cured with a well-tolerated, once daily treatment for 12 weeks.”

The most recent statistics indicate that the VA has treated and cured nearly 100,000 veterans with HCV,

a much higher proportion than any other health care system in the nation, Ross added.

Any veteran enrolled in the VA health care system who has any concerns about hepatitis C is encouraged to request testing and evaluation at his or her nearest VA hospital.

“Now is the time to get tested, treated and cured,” Ross said. “The Department of Veterans Affairs is ready to do all of these. Initial testing is free. Treatment co-pays are need-based and affordable. It may save your life.”

This article is featured in the 2019 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janice Phelan](#). Janice Phelan is a freelance writer based in Lee's Summit, Mo.