HIV Spikes Among Drug Users in Middle East, North Africa

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There is a burgeoning epidemic of HIV among injection drug users (IDUs) in various countries in the Middle East and North Africa, which have had historically low rates of HIV. Publishing their findings in PLOS Medicine, researchers conducted a systematic review of 23 countries and found emerging epidemics among IDUs in at least one-third of the countries in this region.

These epidemics appear to have taken shape during the past decade or so and are on the rise in most cases, although rates vary from country to country. The researchers found that in countries such as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Oman and Pakistan an average of 10 to 15 percent of the IDUs are living with HIV. In Pakistan, the prevalence of HIV among IDUs increased from 11 percent in 2005 to 25 percent in 2011. Iran, on the other hand, has seen its IDU prevalence rate level off at about 15 percent. And then there are countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria where HIV remains relatively rare among IDUs.

“The levels of HIV infection among people who inject drugs tell only half of the story. We also see high levels of risky practices that will likely expose this population to further HIV transmission in the coming years,” Laith Abu-Raddad, PhD, principal investigator of the study and associate professor of public health in the Infectious Disease Epidemiology Group at Weill Cornell Medical College-Qatar, said in a release. “We found that nearly half of people who inject drugs are infected with hepatitis C virus, another infection of concern that is also transmitted though sharing of needles and syringes.

“It is of priority that countries in the region expand HIV surveillance systems among [IDUs] to detect and monitor these budding and growing HIV epidemics. About half of the countries of the region still lack sufficient data to assess the levels of HIV infection among this population, and we continue to discover these epidemics several years after their onset. We need to be ahead of the epidemic to prevent a public health burden that this region is largely not prepared to handle,” Abu-Raddad said.

To read the release, click here.

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