Alarming Hepatitis Increases Highlight Need for Investment in Viral Hepatitis Elimination

Continued increase in cases exposes gaps in nation's health care infrastructure.

May 19, 2021 By The AIDS Institute

New data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) today show shocking increases in the number of viral hepatitis cases, an indication that the United States is losing the battle to eliminate this preventable public health threat. Viral hepatitis is a leading cause of liver disease and liver cancer and it is known to cause or exacerbate other serious and chronic health conditions, costing billions of dollars to treat every year. The United States must increase its commitment to eliminating viral hepatitis by investing in evidence-based prevention and treatment strategies and bolstering our nation's public health infrastructure.

Analysis of the data released today show that there were an estimated:

- 37,700 new hepatitis A cases in 2019, a 1,325% increase over 2015;
- 20,700 new cases of hepatitis B in 2019, showing no progress since 2010;
- 57,500 new hepatitis C cases in 2019, representing a 63% increase from 2015 and a 484% increase from 2010.

"Hepatitis A and B are entirely preventable through vaccination, and hepatitis C is curable with treatment," commented Rachel Klein, deputy executive director at The AIDS Institute. "If we have learned anything from the devastation wrought by COVID-19, it is the importance of public health strategies to prevent the spread of infectious disease. In this case, we need concerted efforts to ensure that people in vulnerable communities can get vaccinated, tested, and treated for these infections. That requires funding from Congress and a robust public health infrastructure."

In the United States, CDC's viral hepatitis program oversees the surveillance, prevention, testing, and linkage to care activities for the entire country, but is currently only funded at $39.5 million a year, which is approximately one-tenth of the estimated need to eliminate the disease. Many advocates fear the need is even greater given the impact of COVID-19 on the nation's prevention

infrastructure.

“The data show that existing efforts to contain the hepatitis epidemics are not at the level we need if we are to ever reduce the number of cases,” commented Frank Hood, manager of hepatitis advocacy at The AIDS Institute. “Additional resources are especially needed this year and beyond since COVID-19 prevented many of the important touchpoints that happen every year in the community, like testing, vaccination, and education drives.”

One bright spot in the data released confirms that advances in treatments that cure hepatitis C virus (HCV) can help reduce the impact of viral hepatitis. The data show that there was a 32% reduction in deaths attributable to HCV from 2015-2019, which is the period during which curative treatments became available and more widely used. If more people living with HCV were aware of their status and able to get the treatment they need, many more lives could be saved.

Hepatitis Testing Day is one effort to raise awareness about the importance of testing and to encourage more individuals to learn their status. It has been recognized annually on May 19 since being designated as a national observance in 2013. May is also Hepatitis Awareness Month, which aims to raise awareness of viral hepatitis and its impact on the nation in order to improve the health of those living with viral hepatitis in the country.

In January, the Department of Health and Human Services released the Viral Hepatitis National Strategic Plan: A Roadmap to Elimination 2021-2025, the first federal plan to aim for the elimination of viral hepatitis as a public health threat in the United States. As The AIDS Institute joins others from around the country in recognizing Hepatitis Testing Day, we call upon Congress and the Biden administration to commit to increasing funding for viral hepatitis programs.

This opinion is by The AIDS Institute, a national nonpartisan and nonprofit organization that promotes action for social change through public policy, research, advocacy and education.

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