Hepatitis C Surpasses HIV as Cause of Death in U.S.

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It's official. Chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is associated with more deaths than HIV infection, according to sobering new data presented by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Tuesday, November 8, at the 62nd annual meeting of the American Association for the Studies of Liver Diseases (AASLD) in San Francisco.

The discouraging findings, presented by Scott Holmberg, MD, MPH, chief of the CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis Epidemiology and Surveillance Branch, come from data involving 21.8 million deaths reported to the National Center for Health Statistics between 1999 and 2007. The only cases included in the analysis involved reports that specified HIV, AIDS, HCV or hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection as possible contributors to the deaths.

Encouragingly, death rates associated with chronic HBV infection—a major cause of liver failure and liver cancer—remained relatively flat between 1999 and 2007. In 2007, for example, about 1,800 U.S. residents died of HBV-related complications, which translated into less than one chronic hepatitis B-attributable death per 100,000 people in this country.

Death rates related to HIV infection continue to fall. Whereas HIV contributed to 6 per 100,000 deaths in 1999, the rate dropped to less than four per 100,000 deaths in 2007.

Hepatitis C–related deaths have increased sharply, Holmberg's team reported. Whereas HCV contributed to roughly 3 per 100,000 deaths in 1999, the HCV-related death rate exceeded 4 per 100,000 people in the United States by 2007.

With respect to crude numbers, roughly 12,700 HIV-related deaths were reported to the National Center for Health Statistics in 2007. More than 15,000 HCV-related deaths were reported to the center that year.

Most viral hepatitis deaths occurred in people in the prime of their lives. About 59 percent of people who died of complications related to hepatitis B were between the ages of 45 and 64. The impact of chronic hepatitis C was even more substantial—roughly 73 percent of the deaths related to HCV were in baby boomers.

Not surprisingly, death rates were highest among certain populations. For example, people coinfected with both HBV and HCV faced a 30-fold increase in the risk of death from liver disease

or related complications. Alcohol abuse was associated with a four-fold increase in the risk of death. Coinfection with HIV nearly doubled the risk of death from HBV-related complications and quadrupled the risk of death from HCV-associated liver disease.

“[Achieving] declines in mortality similar to those seen with HIV,” Holmberg’s group concluded, “will require new policy directions and commitment to detect and link infectious persons to care and successful treatment.”

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