The Other Viral Pandemic

Updates on efforts to end viral hepatitis

March 28, 2022 By Trent Straube

You've probably read about the national Ending the HIV Epidemic plan, launched in 2019 with the goal of reducing new HIV rates by 90% by 2030. Well, last year the federal government released a similar strategy for battling viral hepatitis. That nationwide effort aims to prevent new hepatitis cases, improve health outcomes and reduce health inequities.

Viral hepatitis attacks the liver, which acts as the body's filter. In fact, hepatitis means "inflammation of the liver." Over time, it can be deadly. The most common hepatitis viruses are spread via contaminated food and water (hepatitis A) and shared needles and sex (hepatitis B and C). Transmission via blood transfusion is now very rare. Folks living with HIV are at higher risk for coinfection with viral hepatitis. Effective vaccines are available for hep A and B. What's more, hep C is curable in most cases (but not HIV and hep B).

Nearly 1.2 million people in the United States are living with HIV, compared with the 2.3 million people with chronic hepatitis C and the 862,000 with hep B. These numbers will likely climb, spurred by the opioid crisis and injection drug use. (Some 100,000 Americans died of drug overdoses between April 2020 and 2021, a new record.)

Faced with these dire stats, the federal government now supports evidence-based harm reduction methods, such as syringe exchanges. In December, New York City opened the first officially authorized safe injection sites in the nation. Lawmakers in New Jersey and Maine have eased restrictions regarding syringes, and local advocates and health care providers have stepped up awareness, testing and treatment efforts. The nonprofit Tulsa CARES opened an HIV and hepatitis C clinic (Oklahoma ranks third in the nation for hepatitis C deaths and has a high rate of rural HIV cases). And earlier this year, advocates and researchers launched Hep ElimiNATION, a partnership to track and grade efforts to end hepatitis in each state plus DC and Puerto Rico.

Also of note: May is Hepatitis Awareness Month, including National Hispanic Hepatitis Awareness Day on May 15 and National Hepatitis Testing Day on May 19. To learn more about viral hepatitis, visit POZ's sister publication HepMag.com.

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