



Hepatitis C and Colorado

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is an infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis means swelling of the liver. The hepatitis C virus is spread when infected blood comes in contact with another person's blood. Less than ¼ of people will clear the virus from their body. Current or past infection is detected by a blood test. Anyone that has ever been infected with the hepatitis C virus will test positive for the antibody to the hepatitis C virus. There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.

What does Hepatitis C Infection Do?

Hepatitis C is called a "silent infection". Only 20%-30% of newly infected people have symptoms. Symptoms are mild and not likely to prompt a medical visit. This makes new infections hard to detect. People with other health concerns or who have been infected for nearly 20 years may experience episodes of low energy, dark urine, joint pain, loss of appetite, and abdominal pain. Even without symptoms, the virus can damage the liver. Up to 5% of people that carry the hepatitis C virus will suffer from cirrhosis, chronic liver disease, or liver cancer.

Who's Infected with the Hepatitis C Virus?

Prior to the early 1990s, people were often infected as a result of blood transfusions or the use of blood products. In 1992, a screening test was developed to identify the virus, and this type of infection is now rare.

Most new cases today are the result of sharing among fellow drug users. This includes sharing the drugs, needles or other tools for preparing and injecting drugs. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also continues to investigate cases related to healthcare settings.

The Burden of Disease

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment estimates that 78,718 Coloradoans have ever been infected with hepatitis C. Nearly 64,000 Coloradoans are currently living with the infection. Since 1992, more than 43,000 hepatitis C cases were identified among Colorado residents. The number of individuals infected with the hepatitis C virus for 20 years or more is expected to peak in 2015. Many of these people still aren't aware of their infection and need to be tested.

Colorado's Response to Hepatitis C Infection

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) partners with community based organizations and local health departments throughout the state to:

- Promote hepatitis C testing for those at greatest risk of infection;
- Monitor the burden of hepatitis C in the community;
- Educate those at risk and the general public about hepatitis C, and
- Provide outreach services that link people to treatment.

In 2008/2009, CDPHE funded 12 sites to provide hepatitis C testing to clients at high-risk of infection. Sixteen percent the people tested positive for the hepatitis C virus. Many of these people were also offered free hepatitis A and B vaccine.