

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) continues to be a significant and widespread problem in Colorado. It is estimated that 1.6% of the non-institutionalized US population has been infected by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) and approximately 1.3% have chronic infections (1). Assuming a similar distribution of disease burden in Colorado, it is anticipated that at least 76,000 Colorado residents have been infected by HCV. The prevalence of HCV has been shown to be significantly higher among certain risk groups who are underrepresented in these estimates, especially injection drug users (IDU) and incarcerated individuals. A recent study of the HCV seroprevalence of Denver injection drug users found that 73% of those tested for HCV had been infected by the virus (2). In correctional facilities approximately 16%-41% of prison inmates have ever been infected with HCV (3). Although the virus affects some populations at higher rates than others, it crosses lines of income, education, race, geographic location, and age making it an important issue for all Coloradans.

Numerous barriers exist in addressing the public health threat of hepatitis C virus in Colorado. Stigma associated with HCV may prevent people from reaching out for services and support. Many areas of our state lack health care providers who are familiar with treating chronic HCV infection. Many people are confused by the various types of viral hepatitis and do not understand the considerable impact of HCV in our state. Patients with chronic hepatitis C need long term medical follow up and support. However, high medical costs, stigma, and limited resources and referrals are barriers to meeting the challenge posed by HCV in Colorado.

A key strategy for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment in addressing the hepatitis C virus has been to partner with community based organizations and local health departments throughout the state to provide free HCV screening for high-risk individuals. These sites provide testing for clients with a history of any of the following: injection drug use; receiving blood or blood products prior to 1992; receiving blood outside of the US; hemodialysis; needle sharing partner of someone known to be HCV positive; and/or sexual partner of someone who is HCV positive. From 2008 through 2010, 2649 individuals were tested at these sites around the state. Of the 2649 individuals tested, 448 (17%) tested positive for HCV antibodies.

The hepatitis C screening program has taken on new importance in the last year. In May 2011, the FDA approved the first direct-acting antiviral medications for treatment of chronic hepatitis C virus infection. The release of these new medications has made HCV a curable illness for the majority of those infected. The screening program will continue to target those at greatest risk of infection so that they have the opportunity to learn their status and seek medical care for the monitoring and/or treatment of the infection.

1. Armstrong G, Wasley A; Simard E, McQuillan G, Kuhnert W, and Alter M, PhD. The Prevalence of Hepatitis C Virus Infection in the United States, 1999 through 2002. *Ann Intern Med.* 2006;144:705-714

2. Seroprevalence of Hepatitis C among injection drug users in Denver, Colorado, with Theresa Mickiewicz, Toby LeRoux, Charles Chen and Mark Thrun, will be presented at the 138th American Public Health Association (APHA) Annual Meeting on " Social Justice ", Denver, Color., USA, 6-10 November, 2010
3. www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/Populations/corrections.htm

Reported Hepatitis C Cases, 2008-2010
Colorado HCV Counseling and Testing Sites

Category	Total Tested		Total HCV Positive	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
	2649	100%	448	100%
Sex				
Male	1441	54.40%	262	58.48%
Female	1171	44.20%	179	39.96%
Unknown	37	1.40%	7	1.56%
Race/Ethnicity*				
Hispanic	454	17.14%	78	17.41%
White non-Hispanic	1691	63.84%	268	59.82%
Black non Hispanic	171	6.46%	36	8.04%
American Indian non Hispanic	70	2.64%	4	0.89%
Non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander	19	0.71%	0	0.00%
Other/Refused/Unknown/Multiple	244	9.21%	62	13.84%
Age at Diagnosis				
Less Than 24	595	22.46%	40	8.93%
25-34	866	32.69%	93	20.76%
35-44	545	20.57%	120	26.80%
45-54	422	15.93%	139	31.02%
55-64	130	4.90%	45	10.04%
65 and Over	20	0.76%	3	0.66%
Unknown	71	2.69%	8	1.79%
Risk Criteria for HCV Screening*				
**				
Injecting Drug User	1663	62.77%	384	85.71%
Blood Transfusion Prior to 1992	189	7.13%	38	8.48%
HCVPositive Sex Partner	822	31.03%	149	33.26%
HCV Positive Needle Sharing Partner	518	19.55%	145	32.37%
Multiple Sex Partners	614	23.17%	96	21.42%
History of Tattoos	666	25.14%	133	29.69%
History of Piercings	403	15.21%	72	16.07%
Unknowns	22	.83%	2	.45%

*These categories are not mutually exclusive.

**Risk factors are based on information from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases, the National Institutes of Health, and the Institute of Medicine

