

HCV KNOWLEDGE AND RISKS BEHAVIORS AMONG YOUNG SUBURBAN PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS

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Background: In the United States, Hepatitis C (HCV) infection among young (≤ 30) suburban people who inject drugs (PWID) is an emerging epidemic, yet little is known about the factors contributing to increased exposure to HCV infection among this population. From 2006 to 2012 reported cases of acute HCV among young persons ≤ 30 rose from 36% to 49% of all reported cases, attributed primarily to injection drug use as prescription opioid users moved to the cheaper alternative of heroin. Current research on this topic has been limited to urban and rural settings. Here we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 14 young suburban PWID to examine their range of HCV knowledge and risk behaviors.

Methods: Respondents were young suburban PWID recruited at a syringe exchange program (SEP) in Newark, NJ. All currently or recently lived in suburban areas of New Jersey and were between the ages of 18 and 31. Interview domains included: drug use trajectory, HCV transmission, symptoms, long-term effects, treatment, and barriers to treatment. Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Data were analyzed using grounded theory and the constant comparative method to identify and code common themes.

Results: Substantial gaps were identified in HCV knowledge. While most respondents were aware that HCV is a blood-borne virus that affects the liver, they had only minimal knowledge regarding transmission, symptoms, and available treatments. However, nearly all said they would seek treatment if they tested HCV+. Most respondents also reported risk behaviors, primarily sharing syringes, though few recognized the possibility of HCV infection as a result.

Conclusion: Accurate HCV information is failing to reach young suburban PWID. In addition, they may not fully comprehend or retain the information they do receive. More effective and innovative efforts are required to disseminate effective HCV prevention information to this population.

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