

In US, hepatitis C often untreated because of 'barriers' to care

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Electron micrographs of hepatitis C virus purified from cell culture. Scale bar is 50 nanometers. Credit: Center for the Study of Hepatitis C, The Rockefeller University.

US health authorities warned Tuesday of a large number of untreated hepatitis C patients, despite the fact that a cure for the dangerous disease has been available for a decade.

They urged [health insurance companies](#) and other health care organizations to remove administrative and other "barriers" to life-saving care.

Fewer than one in three people in the United States with [health insurance](#) receive treatment for hepatitis C within a year of diagnosis, according to a report published Tuesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Antiviral treatment consists of taking pills orally for a few weeks.

"Almost overnight, hepatitis C went from a deadly lifelong chronic infection to something easily cured by medications," said Jonathan Mermin, head of the CDC's center for HIV, [viral hepatitis](#), STD and tuberculosis prevention.

But the initial price of treatment has led many insurance companies to create "barriers" to access, he said, which have sometimes remained in place despite a sharp drop in cost in recent years.

Mermin listed some of the stringent prerequisites, including that [liver damage](#) already be observed to begin treatment, that the doctor receive prior authorization from [insurance companies](#), or that the patient abstain from drugs or alcohol for several months.

"No barrier, including paperwork or profits, should keep people from life-saving treatments," he said.

Hepatitis C, for which there is no vaccine, is transmitted primarily through blood contact. The highest rates of infection are in people under age 40.

The most common mode of infection is through the injection of drugs.

Health officials are calling for the promotion of free needle exchange programs, where people can exchange used needles for clean ones.

If left untreated, hepatitis C can become chronic, sometimes over decades, with serious complications including cirrhosis or liver cancer.

In 2019, hepatitis C contributed to the deaths of about 14,000 people in the United States, and 290,000 people worldwide.

The number of new US infections is increasing: it currently stands around 60,000 cases per year, four times higher than a decade ago.

Health authorities estimate that nearly 40 percent of infected people in the United States do not know they have hepatitis C.

The CDC recommends that everyone get tested at least once in their lifetime and that people at risk get tested regularly.

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