

PHE and NHSE launch national drive to trace hepatitis C patients

Public Health England and NHS England are working to find thousands of people living with hepatitis C, offering them new treatments that in most cases cure the illness

Public Health England (PHE) and NHS England have launched a national exercise to identify and treat patients who have been previously diagnosed with hepatitis C. In recent years new, potentially curative treatments have been developed for hepatitis C, but tens of thousands of people who were diagnosed in the past may not have accessed them.

A new report, the first of its kind, by PHE shows more than 24,500 people in England have accessed new hepatitis C treatments in the last three years. The new report also established that 95% of people who received and completed hepatitis C treatment have been cured of the serious and potentially life-threatening infection in the last three years. This is primarily due to effective new direct acting antiviral medication which became available on the NHS in 2015.

A large majority of those treated (70%) report injecting drugs as their likely risk for acquiring hepatitis C. It is reassuring that treatment is reaching other groups at increased risk of infection, as 11% of those receiving treatment were of Asian ethnicity and almost a third were born outside the UK.

PHE is urging those who may have been at risk of contracting hepatitis C, especially if they have injected drugs, even if only once or in the past, to get tested, as often people with the infection do not have any specific symptoms until their liver has been significantly damaged. Many people do not know they have the infection, and when symptoms do occur they are often mistaken for other conditions, resulting in many people remaining undiagnosed.

Dr Helen Harris, Clinical Scientist at PHE, said:

“Hepatitis C is a serious infection and therefore we are delighted to see that at least 9 in 10 people who have completed treatment in England have now been cured. This is fantastic news, and a step towards eliminating hepatitis as a major public health threat by 2030, as knowing the numbers accessing treatment is vital to tackling this infection.

“We will however continue in our endeavours to find and treat everyone who is living with hepatitis C. If you have been at risk of contracting hepatitis C, particularly through injecting drugs, even if you injected only once or in the past, then I urge you to get tested to see if you would benefit from these new, effective treatments.”

Dr Graham Foster, NHS England’s Hepatitis C clinical chair, said:

“This dramatic NHS progress in treating hepatitis C over the past few years is one of the biggest but least acknowledged NHS success stories. By investing several hundred million pounds, NHS England has helped transform the lives of thousands of people, and with fair pricing from the drug companies the NHS has a real prospect of eliminating hepatitis C altogether.”

Rachel Halford, Chief Executive of The Hepatitis C Trust, said:

"We have an extraordinary opportunity to eliminate hepatitis C in the near future if we can ensure all those living with the virus are treated with simple, curative treatments. We know that many people who were previously diagnosed were never treated, and might be unaware that new treatments are now available. This re-engagement exercise will help ensure everything possible is being done to find, treat, and cure those infected and move towards elimination by 2030."

Two years ago, the UK government committed to a joint ambition with 193 other countries to eliminate the disease as a major public health threat by 2030. As well as testing and treatment, prevention through needle and syringe exchange services and opiate substitution therapies need to be sustained to achieve and maintain elimination.

If untreated, infection with hepatitis C can lead to liver damage, cancer and even death. Hepatitis C is spread through blood-to-blood contact, most commonly in England by sharing needles contaminated with the virus, but even sharing razors or toothbrushes with an infected person could pass on the virus.

If someone thinks they have been at-risk of catching hepatitis C, PHE recommend they get tested at their local GP practice, sexual health or community drug services. If people aren't sure about whether they are at risk, they can take a short quiz on The [Hepatitis C Trust](#) website to find out if they should get tested.

Notes to Editors

1. You can find information on the hepatitis C re-engagement exercise at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hepatitis-c-patient-re-engagement-exercise>
2. You can find the full report on *Hepatitis C Treatment Monitoring in England* at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hepatitis-c-treatment-monitoring-in-england>
3. Key data includes:
 - a) 24,592 people received hepatitis C treatment, between April 2015 - April 2018.
 - b) Amongst those in whom it was possible to determine the outcome of treatment (16,571 out of 24, 592 people): 95.2% achieved an sustained viral response 12 weeks post treatment completion, 3.4% became hepatitis C positive again after treatment; 0.5% became hepatitis C positive again during treatment; and 0.9% remained hepatitis C positive.
 - c) Data shows the likely route of hepatitis C transmission (data collected from 24, 592 people) was: 0.8% mother to child; 12% non-occupational contact with blood in healthcare setting; 0.6% occupation exposure; 5% other blood exposure e.g. tattoo; 70% injecting drugs; 6.5% through sexual transmission; and 5.5% via other routes
 - d) You can find regional data (by Operational Delivery Network) throughout the *Hepatitis C Treatment Monitoring in England* report

4. Hepatitis C can be treated with medicines that clear the virus. These usually need to be taken for several weeks. Until a few years ago, most people would have taken 2 main medications called pegylated interferon (a weekly injection) and ribavirin (a capsule or tablet). The new tablet-only treatments known as direct acting antivirals have shorter treatment durations and fewer side effects. Using these latest medications, more than 90% of people with hepatitis C may be cured.
5. PHE's Hepatitis C Operational Delivery Network (ODN) profile tool provides estimates of hepatitis C prevalence, diagnoses, treatment and severe hepatitis C-related liver disease at local level to help with local planning and delivery of awareness-raising, testing and diagnosis and treatment services. It is available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hepatitis-c-commissioning-template-for-estimating-disease-prevalence>
6. NICE guidance (2012) recommends screening for hepatitis C infection in the following situations:
 - a) current and past injecting drug use
 - b) blood transfusion pre-1991 and/or treatment with a blood product pre-1986
 - c) born or raised in a high prevalence country (Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Eastern and Southern Europe, the Middle East, the pacific islands)
 - d) babies whose mothers have HCV infection
 - e) prisoners and young offenders
 - f) looked after children
 - g) those living in hostels or who are homeless
 - h) HIV positive men who have sex with men
 - i) close contacts of someone with HCV infection