

Many Homeless Vets Infected with Hepatitis C

VISN 1 MIRECC Investigators found that 45% of a sample of homeless veterans were infected with Hepatitis C Virus (HCV), a chronic infection that leads to serious liver disease in a substantial proportion of those affected. HCV is a blood borne pathogen spread through contact with infected blood, most commonly when needles are shared by injection drug users. Chronic liver disease is the tenth leading cause of death in the U.S. and 40% of this liver disease is related to HCV. Most people with HCV infection have no symptoms until the disease has led to serious liver damage, a process that can take 10 to 20 years. The rate of HCV in the homeless veterans was 25 times that seen in the general population and was mostly related to a history of substance abuse. This infection represents a serious health risk for homeless veterans. While the infection is incurable, its progress can be slowed by medical treatments and avoiding practices that strain the liver, such as alcohol abuse. Infected individuals can prevent spread to others through avoiding needle sharing and high risk sexual practices. The researchers, Drs. Rani Desai, Robert Rosenheck and Vincent Agnello, recommend that homeless substance abusing veterans be routinely tested for HCV, educated about ways to slow its progress, taught how to avoid spreading the disease and given medical management.