

# Hepatitis C-related deaths hit record high in U.S., CDC says

By **Lena H. Sun** May 4 at 4:13 PM

Deaths from the liver disease hepatitis C reached an all-time high in 2014, killing more Americans than HIV, tuberculosis and staph infections.

New data released Wednesday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that more Americans die now as a result of hepatitis C infection than from 60 other infectious diseases combined.

Baby boomers, born between 1945 and 1965, are the hardest hit group. They account for 75 percent of all hepatitis C infections. Many of them have unknowingly been living with the infection for years and were most likely infected during medical procedures after World War II, when injection and blood transfusion technologies were not as safe as they are now, health officials said.

About 3.5 million Americans have chronic hepatitis C infection, and the number of deaths related to the disease has been on the rise in recent years despite the availability of new drugs that cure the disease. But at least half of those infected don't know it and have not been tested. Untreated, hepatitis C can slowly and silently damage the liver, leading to cancer and other serious health consequences.

As many as 1 in 5 people with hepatitis C develop cirrhosis; hepatitis C is also the number one cause of liver transplants.

"We believe the number of hepatitis C cases should not be going up, it should be going

away because we have lifesaving treatment," said John Ward, director of the CDC's division of viral hepatitis. "But large numbers of people don't know they have it, or they're not in care, or they're not receiving the treatment that's recommended for them."

The drugs are safe, and a typical course of treatment is 12 weeks, Ward said. But the extraordinary outlays for the drugs can be as much as \$1,000 a day or more, posing a formidable barrier. In addition, some insurers require patients to get prescriptions from specialists or require patients to be extremely ill before the medication will be covered, Ward said.

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Preliminary data for 2014 show that the number of deaths associated with the disease has reached 19,659. That's an increase from the 19,368 deaths reported in 2013, when deaths from hepatitis C eclipsed those from all other infectious diseases.

Because hepatitis C often has few noticeable symptoms, the number of new cases being reported is probably an undercount, Ward said. Officials estimate that the number of new infections is closer to 30,000 per year.

New cases of hepatitis C infection occurred mainly among young, white people who inject drugs in rural and suburban areas of the Midwest and Eastern United States, officials said.

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