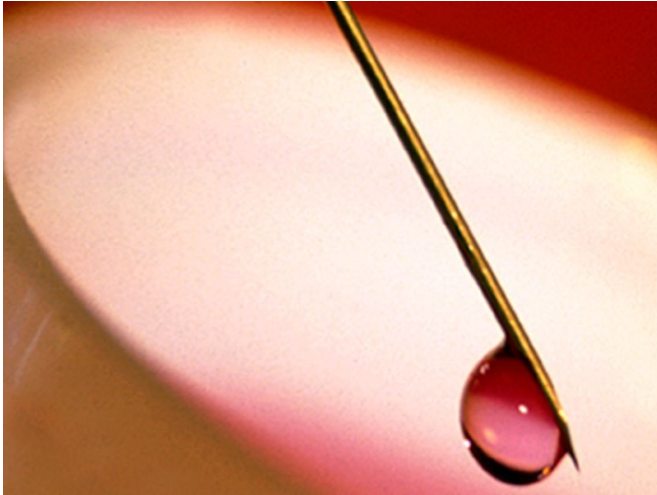


# Hepatitis C now leading infectious disease killer in U.S.

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(HealthDay)—The number of hepatitis C-linked deaths in the United States reached a record high in 2014, and the virus now kills more Americans than any other infectious disease, health officials report.

There were 19,659 [hepatitis C](#)-related deaths in 2014, according to preliminary data from U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Those tragically high numbers aren't necessary, one CDC expert said.

"Why are so many Americans dying of this preventable, curable disease? Once hepatitis C testing and treatment are as routine as they are for high cholesterol and colon cancer, we will see people living the long, healthy lives they deserve," said Dr. Jonathan Mermin in an agency news release.

He directs the CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention.

If not diagnosed and treated, people with hepatitis C are at increased risk for liver cancer and other life-threatening diseases. They may also unknowingly infect others.

The new CDC study found that the number of hepatitis C-related deaths in 2013 exceeded the combined number of deaths from 60 other infectious diseases, including HIV and tuberculosis.

The numbers might even be higher, the agency said. That's because the new statistics are based on data from death certificates, which often underreport hepatitis C.

Most cases of hepatitis C are among baby boomers—those born between 1945 and 1965. According to the CDC, many were infected during medical procedures such as injections and blood transfusions when these procedures were not as safe as they are now. Many hepatitis C-infected "boomers" may even have lived with the disease for many years without knowing it, the CDC said.

The preliminary data also suggests a new wave of hepatitis C infections among [injection drug](#) users. These "acute" cases of hepatitis C infection more than doubled since 2010, increasing to 2,194 reported cases in 2014, the CDC found.

The new cases were mainly among young whites with a history of injection drug use who are living in rural and suburban areas of the Midwest and Eastern United States.

"Because hepatitis C often has few noticeable symptoms, the number of new cases is likely much higher than what is reported. Due to limited screening and underreporting, we estimate the number of new infections is closer to 30,000 per year," said Dr. John Ward, director of CDC's Division of Viral Hepatitis.

"We must act now to diagnose and treat hidden

infections before they become deadly and to prevent new infections," he added.

About 3.5 million Americans have hepatitis C and about half are unaware of their infection. One-time hepatitis C testing is recommended for everyone born from 1945 to 1965 and regular testing is suggested for others at high risk, according to the CDC and the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.

Luckily, curative drugs have advanced the treatment of hepatitis C infection over recent years. For people diagnosed with the virus, these new and highly effective treatments can cure the vast majority of infections in two to three months, the CDC said.

The new report was published online May 4 in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*.

**More information:** The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [hepatitis C](#).

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