

## HEPATITIS C: An Epidemic Among U.S. Veterans

The hepatitis C virus is a national public health threat whose impact is even more devastating for the veteran community. Nationwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that up to 3.9 million Americans are living with hepatitis C, while the vast majority – up to 75 percent – do not realize they are infected. This contagious blood-borne disease is the leading cause of catastrophic liver damage, cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver transplants.

Veterans are at extremely high risk for the disease. Prevalence of hepatitis C among veterans who receive care through the Veterans Health Administration (VA) is twice the rate reported in the general population. Still, the number of infections is estimated to be even higher because less than half of veterans in VA care have been tested, and because most veterans do not receive care through the VA and are even more unlikely to be tested. Latino Americans, who account for 6 percent of veterans and 11 percent of active duty military, are almost two times as likely to be infected with hepatitis C. (Sources: Department of Veterans Affairs, HCVadvocate.org)

**Hepatitis C is a growing public health crisis for veterans, largely because the vast majority of infected individuals are unaware that they have the virus.**

**The Veterans Health Council recommends that all veterans – especially baby boomers – get tested.**

### Why Are Veterans at High-Risk for Hepatitis C?

- Veterans are at high risk for the hepatitis C virus, likely due to the prevalence of blood exposure in battle or medical settings. (Source: [aidsmap.com](#))
- In a VA study, 36 percent of infected patients reported a history of transfusion; 14 percent reported blood exposure in combat and 9 percent reported combat wounds. Almost 20 percent reported non-combat occupational exposure to blood or bodily fluids. (Source: [HCVadvocate.org](#))
- Most veterans with hepatitis C were likely infected during the Vietnam War era (1964–1975). Nationwide, the baby boomer population – a common age group to serve in Vietnam – are more than five times more likely to have hepatitis C. (Sources: Department of Veteran Affairs and CDC)

### The Hepatitis C Epidemic is Taking its Toll on Veterans.

- Over the last decade, the number of hepatitis C-infected veterans diagnosed with liver cancer has increased ten-fold, while the number of veterans diagnosed with cirrhosis has tripled to more than 25,000. (Source: Department of Veterans Affairs)
- In 2010, nearly 1 in 7 veterans being treated for hepatitis C had a history of cirrhosis, and more than 1,300 new cases of liver cancer were diagnosed. (Source: Department of Veterans Affairs)
- In VA care, hepatitis C led to 70,000 inpatient stays, 6.2 million outpatient visits, and more than 6.6 million outpatient prescription fills during 2010. (Source: Department of Veterans Affairs)
- Nearly 7,000 hepatitis C-positive veterans died in 2010, up from 1,986 in 2001. (Source: Department of Veterans Affairs)

### Screening is Critical to Addressing Hepatitis C.

- The VA began risk-based HCV screening in 1998 following recommendations from the CDC. Still, among the 5.5 million veterans in VA care in 2012, nearly half had not been tested for hepatitis C. (Source: [HCV advocate.org](#))
- Furthermore, most veterans are not in VA care; they are covered private insurance and Medicare and are unlikely to be tested. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)
- If baby boomer veterans (those born between 1945 and 1965) alone underwent hepatitis C testing, an additional 51,000 veterans with hepatitis C would be identified. (Source: [HCVadvocate.org](#))