

KENTUCKY: Hepatitis C Cases Climbing in NKY

Terry DeMio

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The rate of people infected with hepatitis C in Northern Kentucky (NKY) is far higher than the state or national rate. NKY's infection rate was three times the states in 2011 and approximately 10 times above the US rate when compared to CDC's 2010 rates. National data is not yet available for 2011. According to health department records, NKY reported 23 cases of acute hepatitis C in 2010, but the number increased to 42 in 2011. The likely cause for the high rate is the region's heroin epidemic. To combat the problem, the Independent Health Department District is participating in a pilot program that targets high-risk groups and offers free testing. The department offers counseling, education, and direction in how to get care to those who test positive for the disease. Emily Gresham Wherle, NKY health department spokesperson, says health officials hope that through testing they will gain a better understanding of the extent of the problem. The first round of free testing began in May 2012. The NKY health district includes Grant, Kenton, Campbell, and Boone counties. In September, CDC extended the testing program; by year's end, the health department had recorded 44 cases of acute hepatitis C. Jennifer Hunter, the health department's director of clinical services, said that testing will continue at least until March 2013 when CDC will evaluate results. She notes that the program could be extended again if CDC agrees. Hunter declares, Almost 88 percent (of those tested) had a history of IV drug use. Hepatitis C is very often transferred by sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment used to inject drugs. Many of those being tested are in the 20-29 age range and are from treatment centers or transitional housing. Public health departments have also advised baby boomers to be tested. Dr. Lynne Saddler, district director of health, explains that the current high rate of new hepatitis C cases can be partially credited to the health department's effort to identify and test high-risk people. No vaccine exists for the disease; however, health officials encourage testing to prevent new cases and to make certain those with the disease are treated by a physician.

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