

Hidden cases in Mich. lead to new worries about hepatitis



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

A routine physical showed Jim Buckley had hepatitis C, and he required repeat rounds of drug treatment to cure it because of relapses.

Liver problems now showing up in people infected decades ago.

By Shawn D. Lewis
The Detroit News

The twins were causing a difficult labor.

Pam Sienkiewicz finally was given anesthesia before a Caesarean section, along with two pints of blood following their delivery.

But it wasn't until 22 years later, in 2001, when she was diagnosed with hepatitis C, that Sienkiewicz discovered the blood transfusion administered to save her life also caused the disease.

A blood transfusion received before 1992, when testing of the nation's blood supply was initiated, is one of the primary risk factors for hepatitis C, now the leading cause of liver transplants in the United States.

The number of hepatitis cases in Michigan is growing. Currently, there are 4,500 reported cases in the state, up from 2,385 in 2001, because those who contracted it 10 to 30 years ago are just now discovering they have the virus. But there are thousands more cases that are undiagnosed and unreported.

And there is no vaccine to prevent what has been called "the silent stalker."

"The new cases have actually leveled off. But we're very worried about all those people infected years ago now finding out, because many will need liver transplants," said Kim Kirkey, hepatitis coordinator for the Michigan Department of Community Health.



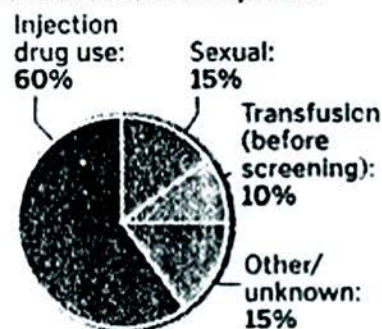
Charles V. Times / The Detroit News

Pam Sienkiewicz of Milford probably contracted hepatitis C...

Risk factors

Individuals who inject drugs are at highest risk for contracting hepatitis C.

Infection sources for hepatitis C:



Source: Centers for Disease Control
The Detroit News

didn't even know I had been given a blood transfusion until weeks later," she said. "When I got really sick three years ago, I thought it was a bad case of food poisoning or the flu. Then the doctor diagnosed hepatitis C, and told me it was probably from the blood transfusion."

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Who should be checked

Contact your medical care provider for a blood test if you:

- Were notified that you received blood from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis.
- Shared a needle with another person for intravenous drug use — even once.
- Received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant before July 1992.
- Received a blood product for clotting problems produced before 1987.
- Have ever been on long-term kidney dialysis.
- Have evidence of liver disease.
- Are a health care worker who has suffered needle-stick accidents.
- Have high-risk sexual behavior without using condoms, multiple partners and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Use cocaine, particularly through your nose, and share straws or other equipment.

Source: Michigan Hepatitis C Coalition

Hepatitis C support groups

DETROIT: Henry Ford Hospital Hepatitis Support, (313) 916-2523

ROYAL OAK: Beaumont Hospital Hepatitis Support, (248) 551-9344

FARMINGTON HILLS:

Hepatitis C Support, (734) 483-9555

SOUTHFIELD: Hepatitis C Support, (248) 559-6370

YPSILANTI: Hepatitis C Support Group, (734) 572-9355

Resources for information on hepatitis C

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (888) 4HEP-CDC; www.cdc.gov

Hepatitis Foundation International (800) 891-0707; www.hepfi.org

American Liver Foundation (800) GO-LIVER; www.liverfoundation.org

Hep C Connection (800) 522-HEPC; www.hepc-connection.org

Source: Michigan Hepatitis C Coalition

MI-0130

DAILY NEWSPAPER

DETROIT NEWS
Detroit, MI

Evening Circulation — 233,085
Daily

NOVEMBER 3, 2003