



# HCSP FACT SHEET

HCV ADVOCATE

• HCV POPULATIONS •

## *HCV & Native American Peoples*

Written by: Alan Franciscus, Editor-in-Chief

### *Foreword*

The prevalence of hepatitis C (HCV) in the Native American population in the United States is believed to be higher than in the general population. Unfortunately, there have been very few research papers on Native Americans and hepatitis C. This article will discuss three papers that have been published.

### **North America<sup>1</sup>**

The first paper examined the prevalence of hepatitis C in indigenous peoples of Alaska. This included the Yupik, Inupiat and Aleut peoples who comprise 14.9% of Alaska's population.

By comparison, Indigenous Americans who live within the continental United States comprise approximately 1.2% of the population. A review by the Indian Health Services (IHS) clinics in Arizona of 1496 people reported a prevalence of 16%. In California, the IHS reported a 36.3% prevalence in a study of 344 persons.

### **IHS/CDC Review<sup>2</sup>**

In another journal article<sup>2</sup> the Indian Health Services (IHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted a chart review of two IHS clinical facilities. The review was of American Indians (AIs) and Alaska Natives (ANs) 18 years old or older seen in primary care clinics between October 01, 2001 through September 30, 2003.

The mean age of the people (mostly male) in the study was men~40yo, women~42yo; the population came from 57 different American Indian tribes.

There were 35,712 AI/AN patients of whom 251 patients (1%) had at least one HCV code sent in. An HCV EIA (antibody) test was sent in for 209 (83%) patients, and 203 of these (99%) were antibody positive. Confirmatory testing was performed in 144 of the 203 (70%) antibody-positive patients. HCV RNA or viral load was confirmed in 144 patients (100%).

### **HCSP FACT SHEET** *A publication of the Hepatitis C Support Project*

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF,  
HCSP PUBLICATIONS**  
*Alan Franciscus*

**DESIGN**  
*Leslie Hoex,  
Blue Kangaroo Design*

**PRODUCTION**  
*C.D. Mazoff, PhD*

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

Hepatitis C Support Project  
PO Box 15144  
Sacramento, CA 95813  
alanfranciscus@hcvadvocate.org

The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

This information is provided by the Hepatitis C Support Project a nonprofit organization for HCV education, support and advocacy

Reprint permission is granted and encouraged with credit to the Hepatitis C Support Project.

## HCV & Native American Peoples

The self-reported risk-factors were injection drug use (41%); no risk factor reported (38%); blood or blood products from before 1992 (9%); sexual contact (3%); other (6%); household contact (3%).

The key points of the study outcomes included:

- Confirmatory HCV testing was not obtained in 30% of patients with a positive EIA (antibody test)
- A quantitative HCV test (viral load) was obtained in only 52% of patients
- Only 39% had a genotype test
- Only 12% of patients had a liver biopsy
- Only 30% of the patients received a hepatitis A vaccine and 38% received the hepatitis B vaccine
- Treatment was only started in 37 of the 144 (26%) patients who had confirmed HCV infection

### **The Omaha Clinic<sup>3</sup>**

A study was conducted in Omaha, NE at the Fred LeRoy Health and Wellness Center. A total of two hundred and forty-three Native Americans were screened (161 females; 82 males). The mean age was  $41 \pm 1$  yo. Over 30 tribes from across the United States were seen at the clinic and represented in the study. The majority of the participants lived in an urban environment—only seven participants (2.9%) lived on an Indian reservation. The participants were also asked to fill out a risk factor assessment.

The study participants were screened for HCV antibodies and a follow-up HCV RNA (viral load) test was performed to confirm active HCV infection. If a participant received an HCV RNA positive result a one-on-one counseling session with a physician to discuss the possible consequences of HCV was offered, as well as treatment options and counseling on the importance of avoiding alcohol. A referral to a hepatologist for further monitoring and possible treatment was also offered.

**Results:** The overall results showed that there was an HCV antibody positive rate of 11.5% (8.1% females; 18.3% males) and the HCV RNA results were reported at 8.6% (6.2% females; 13.4% males). All the participants who tested HCV RNA positive were between the ages of 30 to 59 years old (30-39 (13.3%); 40-49 (12.0%); 50-59 (14.3%).

**Risk Factors:** Injection drug use was the number one risk factor followed by receiving a tattoo more than 5 years ago, having sex with an HCV positive person, alcoholism, any transfusion, any tattoo and receiving a blood transfusion before 1992.

Importantly, participation in a Sun Dance ritual was not a significant factor. The Sun Dance ritual is a Sioux ceremony that is practiced by many Great Plains Indians. It includes “flesh offerings,” where 1 or more incisions are made in the skin of those participating in the ceremony. In the past, one knife was used, but now tribal-sponsored ceremonies use only sterile, surgical scalpels.

The study is ongoing and more data will be collected. The authors also stated that more studies are needed in larger Native American populations.

*The purpose of these future studies will be to:*

- Confirm the findings in the present study of the risk of acquiring HCV by receiving a tattoo
- Assess the prevalence of HCV in Native Americans living on reservations
- Improve the level of HCV education
- Collect information on genotype
- Understand the response to HCV treatment in Native Americans

A special thank you to Lora L. Langley, RN, BSN for providing a short overview of the study and providing participants with a copy of the journal article.

***HCV & Native American Peoples***

**Conclusion**

There is clearly a need for more studies to understand the true prevalence of hepatitis C in the Indigenous Peoples of America. There has not been a published study on the new direct acting antiviral therapies to treat Indigenous Americans. But since the new therapies have similar cure rates across all races and ethnicities, it is expected that the newer therapies will be just as effective in Indigenous Americans infected with hepatitis C.

\*A future article will focus on Indigenous Peoples of Canada

**Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Hepatitis C Virus in American Indian/Alaskan Native and Aboriginal Peoples of North America by J. D. Rempel and J. Uhanova

<sup>2</sup>Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice Volume 3, Number 3, Number 2, Fall 2009, pp. 59-66 titled Hepatitis C Diagnoses in an American Indian Primary Care Population

<sup>3</sup>A.S. Neumeister, et al. Hepatitis-C Prevalence in an Urban Native-American Clinic: A Prospective Screening Study. Journal of the National Medical Association, vol. 99, no.4

***Related publications:***

- **HCV and Native American Peoples Page**  
[www.hcvadvocate.org/community/Native.asp](http://www.hcvadvocate.org/community/Native.asp)
- **African Americans and HCV**  
[www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets\\_pdf/African\\_Americans.pdf](http://www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/African_Americans.pdf)
- **Hepatitis C and U. S. Hispanics**  
[http://hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets\\_pdf/Hispanics.pdf](http://hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/Hispanics.pdf)

***For more information***

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Californian Consortium for Urban Indian Health</b><br/><a href="http://www.ccuuh.org/">www.ccuuh.org/</a></li> <li>• <b>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</b><br/><a href="http://www.cdc.gov">www.cdc.gov</a></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Native Journey Woman:</b><br/><a href="http://nativejourneywoman.org/">http://nativejourneywoman.org/</a></li> <li>• <b>Office of Minority Health</b><br/><a href="http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/content.aspx?lvl=3&amp;lvlid=541&amp;ID=6494">http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/content.aspx?lvl=3&amp;lvlid=541&amp;ID=6494</a></li> </ul> |
|--|--|

***Visit our websites to learn more about viral hepatitis:***

**[www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org) • [www.hbvadvocate.org](http://www.hbvadvocate.org)  
[www.hepatitistattoos.org](http://www.hepatitistattoos.org)**

***Get Tested. Get Treated. Get Cured.***

