HCV & Native American Peoples

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

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

In another journal article 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%).
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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

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.
**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:**

1. Hepatitis C Virus in American Indian/Alaskan Native and Aboriginal Peoples of North America by J. D. Rempel and J. Uhanova
2. 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

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**Related publications:**

- HCV and Native American Peoples Page
  www.hcvadvocate.org/community/Native.asp
- African Americans and HCV
- Hepatitis C and U. S. Hispanics

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**For more information**

- Californian Consortium for Urban Indian Health
  www.ccuih.org/
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  www.cdc.gov
- Native Journey Woman:
  http://nativejourneywoman.org/
- Office of Minority Health
  http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/content.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=541&ID=6494

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