

VA RESEARCH ON HEPATITIS C



BACKGROUND

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is spread through contact with infected blood or contaminated IV needles, razors or tattoo tools. Hepatitis C is particularly prevalent among veterans, especially those who received blood transfusions prior to 1992. Symptoms can take 20 to 30 years to appear, and often involve serious liver disease. Treatments using the protein *interferon* can be effective.

WHAT VA IS DOING

In fiscal year **2003**, VA spent more than \$2.4 million on 16 research projects relating to hepatitis C. VA investigators received \$4.1 million from non-VA sources for another 104 studies. VA research on hepatitis C includes clinical trials of treatments, epidemiologic studies, investigations into the biological mechanisms of infection, and studies on improving quality of life for hepatitis C patients.

RECENT HIGHLIGHTS

- **VA website on care, research**—Log on to VA's special website on hepatitis C (www.hepatitis.va.gov) and you'll find general information about the condition as well as an overview of VA's efforts in this area. Included are descriptions of research at six VA sites with special hepatitis C programs: Bronx, Long Beach, Manhattan, Portland, Seattle, Richmond and San Francisco.

- **Prevalence higher among Vietnam veterans**—A study of nearly 1,300 patients at 20 VA medical centers found a hepatitis C infection rate of 5.4 percent. The figure for Vietnam veterans was 11.5 percent. Other factors that predicted infection were use of injection drugs; past incarceration of two days or longer; and tattoos. Another recent VA study that focused on homeless veterans in Massachusetts found an infection rate of 44 percent.

- **Reducing side effects of interferon**—Scientists in Portland are exploring ways to reduce the mood disorders that often occur in hepatitis C patients who are treated with interferon. The research includes both laboratory and clinical studies.

For more information:

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