

# Press release: Deaths from hepatitis C have fallen by 11 per cent in the last year

New [data published by Public Health England \(PHE\)](#) show that deaths from hepatitis C-related end-stage liver disease have fallen by 11% in 2017 compared to the previous year.

A fall has been sustained in 2017 after a continued rise in deaths over the last decade. This fall is most likely due to increased use of new antiviral medications now available on the NHS which have the potential to cure the condition in most cases and have fewer side effects than previously used medications.

More people are accessing treatment than ever before with an increase of 19% on the previous year and of 125% when compared to pre-2015 levels.

The new data also shows there was still an average of 1,974 new end-stage liver disease and cancer diagnoses per year, with the rate remaining stable between 2011 to 2015.

In the UK, around 200,000 people have a long-term infection with hepatitis C virus. People who have ever injected drugs are most at risk of infection, but around half of people living with hepatitis C are unaware of their infection.

PHE is urging anyone who has previously been diagnosed with hepatitis C or who has engaged in activities that may have put them at risk to get tested as they can benefit from this potentially curative treatment.

Two years ago, the UK government committed to a joint ambition with 193 other countries to eliminate the disease as a public health threat by 2030. As well as testing and treatment, prevention through needle and syringe exchange services and opiate substitution therapies need to be sustained to achieve and maintain elimination.

Dr Sema Mandal, Consultant Epidemiologist at PHE, said:

The fall in deaths from hepatitis C related advanced liver disease in the last year suggests that more people are accessing new, potentially curative treatments and shows we're making positive steps towards reaching our overall goal of elimination of hepatitis C as a major public health threat.

However, more needs to be done. We are urging anyone who has ever injected drugs, even once or a long time ago, had a tattoo or medical treatment overseas where proper hygiene procedures may not have been followed, or has had a blood transfusion before hepatitis C screening was in place, to get tested at their GP, community drug

services or sexual health clinic. It could save your life.

If untreated, infection with the hepatitis C virus can lead to liver damage, cancer and even death. It is normally spread through blood-to-blood contact by sharing needles, but even sharing razors or toothbrushes with an infected person could pass the virus on.

The disease often has no symptoms until it causes serious complications many years later. Urgent testing and prompt treatment is needed in order to ensure infected people don't suffer from serious health complications in the future.

If people aren't sure about whether they are at risk, they can take a short quiz on the [Hepatitis C Trust](#) website to find out if they should get tested.

## **Background**

1. Hepatitis C can be treated with medicines that stop the virus multiplying inside the body. These usually need to be taken for several weeks. Until a few years ago, most people would have taken 2 main medications called pegylated interferon (a weekly injection) and ribavirin (a capsule or tablet). Tablet-only treatments known as direct acting antivirals which have a short duration and fewer side effects are now available. Using these latest medications, more than 90% of people with hepatitis C may be cured.
2. PHE's hepatitis C Operational Delivery Network (ODN) profile tool provides estimates of hepatitis C prevalence, diagnoses, treatment and severe hepatitis C-related liver disease at local level to help with local planning and delivery of awareness-raising, testing and diagnosis and treatment services.
3. The introduction of widespread needle exchange programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, which provided sterile injecting equipment and opiate substitution therapies, helped to reduce the number of drug-related deaths and blood-borne virus infections. The sustained investment in these services since then has resulted in the UK having one of the lowest rates of hepatitis C among injecting drugs users in the world – but these services must continue for lower hepatitis C rates to be realised.