OPPORTUNITIES TO PREVENT HEPATITIS B INFECTION AMONG PEOPLE WHO USE OR INJECT DRUGS

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Background:
Globally, nearly 300 million people are living with hepatitis B (HBV), the world's most common serious liver infection. Despite the availability of highly effective vaccines, HBV remains a significant public health problem. In recent years, HBV infections in the U.S. are rising, with approximately 36% of new infections occurring among people who inject drugs. Acute HBV infections have risen 50% - 450% in areas heavily impacted by the opioid crisis. Increasing rates of HBV infections reveal gaps in HBV adult vaccination coverage. In 2021, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended the HBV vaccine for all adults in the U.S. aged 19-59. The CDC is also working towards a recommendation for a universal one-time HBV screening for adults.

Methods:
A survey of health department (HD) vaccine program staff representing 26 states documented barriers to distribution of HBV vaccines in high impact settings like syringe service programs (SSPs).

Results:
Nearly 70% of HDs stated policies do not support universal adult HBV vaccine recommendations. Identified barriers to distributing HBV vaccination include inability to identify and reach vulnerable populations, lack of staff and proper equipment to provide immunizations, and difficulty enrolling nontraditional immunization sites to provide vaccination. Less than half of SSPs are eligible to receive and distribute adult HBV vaccines through current funding mechanisms. For eligible SSPs, HDs face barriers in receiving and distributing HBV vaccines due to factors including lack of participation from SSPs, certifying providers at the SSPs, and staff education and training.

Conclusion:
HBV is often neglected in harm reduction programs and within drug user health advocacy. There are missed opportunities to address HBV alongside prevention of hepatitis C and HIV infections. Updated HBV recommendations provide an opportunity for stakeholders to expand access to HBV prevention among those at risk for infection, including people who use or inject drugs.

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