

# Hepatitis C/HIV: prevalence and access, any changes?

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Injection drug users are the largest group of persons infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV) in Europe. New studies in Germany, e.g. the DRUCK study, show HCV prevalence (HCV RNA) among IVD users between 37.1% in Berlin and 58.0% in Essen. HIV prevalence was low between 1.6% in Cologne and 9.1% in Frankfurt.

The transmission of these infectious diseases is a result of sharing contaminated equipment such as filters and spoons. Unfortunately, we realized too late that needle exchange programmes do not seem to prevent HCV infections as effectively as they prevent HIV infections. While HIV rates were moderate, high rates of HCV infection demonstrate the necessity of intensified prevention strategies.

Many current drug users have only very limited access to the medical system. Research involving people in substitution treatment and current users show that knowledge of their infection status is insufficient. Moreover, in most of the cities, HCV and HIV tests are not offered in community-based low-threshold services. Given the high prevalence of HCV infection, the rate of drug users who are well informed and who have been tested and treated for HCV infection is still unacceptably low.

We identify 4 main strategies to decrease the HCV prevalence in the next 10 years:

1. HCV/HIV counselling and testing in low-threshold services
2. Access to HCV treatment for people who use drugs
3. HBV vaccination for people who use drugs
4. Extension of syringe exchange services to include the dispensation of smoking foils