



Shooting Up: Infections among people who inject drugs in the United Kingdom 2013 - an update, November 2014

A briefing for directors of public health, commissioners and service providers in England

People who inject drugs (PWID) are vulnerable to a wide range of infections that can result in illness and death. The Shooting Up report provides an update on the extent of infections and related behaviours among PWID in the UK. This briefing summarises key messages for local areas in England.

Key points

- In England around half of people who inject psychoactive drugs have been infected with hepatitis C. However, about half of those infected remain undiagnosed.
- HIV infection among people who inject psychoactive drugs remains low compared to that in many other countries, with 1.2% having HIV in 2013.
- Hepatitis B infection is now rare, due to increased vaccine uptake and a decline in the sharing of injecting equipment.
- The injection of amphetamine-type drugs, which have been associated with higher levels of infection risk, has become more common.
- Among those injecting image and performance enhancing drugs (IPED) the level of HIV infection is similar to that among people who inject psychoactive drugs. The proportions of people injecting IPED ever infected with hepatitis B and C are lower than among people who inject psychoactive drugs, but probably higher than in the general population.

Infections among people who inject psychoactive drugs

Hepatitis C levels are still high. PWID remain the group most affected by hepatitis C infection in the UK. In England, 50% of those who inject psychoactive drugs have antibodies to hepatitis C. Data indicate that hepatitis C transmission is probably stable in this group and further effort is needed to reduce this. Although the uptake of diagnostic testing is high (82%), about half of the hepatitis C infections remain undiagnosed - either because people have never had a test or have become infected since their last test.

Hepatitis B is now rare and vaccine uptake has improved. The proportion of those who inject psychoactive drugs in England ever infected with hepatitis B has fallen from 31% in 2003 to 17% in 2013. Less than 1% of this group are currently infected with hepatitis B. This public health success reflects a marked increase in the uptake of vaccination against hepatitis B, with 71% reporting this in 2013. Vaccine uptake has been stable in recent years, but it could be increased further.

HIV levels remain low and the uptake of care is good. HIV infection among PWID remains rare compared with many other countries. Only 1.2% of those who inject psychoactive drugs in England have HIV. Most of those infected with HIV are aware of their infection and are accessing care. The low prevalence of HIV in this group probably reflects the extensive provision of needle and syringe programmes, opioid substitution therapy and other drug treatment in England since the 1980s.

Bacterial infections remain a major problem. Over a quarter (28%) of those who inject psychoactive drugs in England reported experiencing symptoms of an injecting site infection during the preceding year. Severe illnesses due to spore-forming bacteria (such as botulism and tetanus), though rare, continue to occur.

Injecting risk behaviours have declined but remain a problem. In England there has been a decline in the sharing of needles and syringes from 29% in 2003 to 16% in 2013. However, almost one in three of those who inject psychoactive drugs used a needle that they had attempted to clean.

Changing patterns of psychoactive drug injection are a cause for concern. Heroin, alone or in combination with crack-cocaine, is the most commonly injected psychoactive drug in England. However, there is evidence of an increase in the injection of amphetamines and amphetamine-type drugs, such as mephedrone. The injection of amphetamines and amphetamine-type drugs is associated with higher levels of infection-related risk behaviours.

Infections among people who inject image and performance enhancing drugs

The number of people who inject IPED and access needle and syringe programmes has grown substantially in many areas of England. In some areas people using IPED are now the largest group using needle and syringe programmes.

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Recent data indicate that people who inject IPED in England and Wales now have a level of HIV infection that is similar to that among people who inject psychoactive drugs. The proportions of people who inject IPED who have ever been infected with either hepatitis B or C are lower than those among people who inject psychoactive drugs. However, they are probably higher than those in the general population.

Only 40% of those injecting IPED reported uptake of the vaccine against hepatitis B. In this group, just one-third reported ever being tested for hepatitis C and only two in five being tested for HIV.

Public health actions to reduce the harm associated with injecting drug use

Shooting Up recommends that services for PWID are commissioned in line with national strategies and guidance, and provide:

- needle and syringe programmes
- opioid substitution treatment, and
- other drug treatment

These and other services, such as primary care and sexual health services, should provide information and advice on safer injecting practices, preventing infections and the safe disposal of used equipment, as well as access to an appropriate range of other interventions to reduce injection-related harm.

The appropriate provision of the following services is also important:

- diagnostic testing for hepatitis C and access to care pathways for those living with hepatitis C
- vaccinations, including that for hepatitis B, should be maintained and services should explore ways of further improving hepatitis B vaccine uptake
- diagnostic testing for HIV and care pathways for those infected
- information on avoiding injection site infections and easy access to health checks and treatment for injection site infections

Sufficient coverage of these interventions is vital to prevent infections and this should respond to changes in the pattern and the nature of injecting drug use.

Further information

The report *Shooting Up: Infections among people who inject drugs in the United Kingdom 2013 - an update, November 2014*. London: Public Health England, November 2014, plus the accompanying data tables, infographic and slide set can be found [here](#).

Data from the Unlinked Anonymous Monitoring Survey of People Who Inject Drugs, including data for England and the English regions, can be found [here](#).

Links to further information about and data on infections among PWID as well as links to related guidance can be found [here](#).

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