



Researchers Believe US Opioid Epidemic Linked to Spike in Infectious Diseases

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The US opioid epidemic may be driving a spike in infectious diseases, and researchers are scrambling to understand the outbreaks. Right now there is a lack of solid data on case numbers.

What researchers do know is that opioid addiction kills tens of thousands of people every year in the United States, and the epidemic is not slowing down. In fact, over 130 people die every day because of the drug crisis, which is now being considered the worst in US history.

Public health officials are concerned about the surge in bacterial and viral infections linked to opioid misuse. This threatens to compound the crisis.

Bacterial infections are surging, including those caused by *Staphylococcus aureus*, a bacterium that is frequently resistant to antibiotics. There is also a spike in new cases of HIV and hepatitis associated with injecting opioids. This risks undoing decades of progress in corralling these diseases.

Researchers are now trying to understand, identify, and treat these outbreaks in the midst of the opioid

epidemic. However, it is hard to see where the new cases will crop up next. They also have to deal with the stigma associated with drug use that can prevent people with infections from seeking early treatment. These factors hinder research efforts.

“This is like HIV all over again,” said Judith Feinberg, an infectious-disease physician at West Virginia University in Morgantown. “People are stigmatized; they don’t feel they deserve to live. They hear people say it’s a lifestyle choice.”

She compared the current crisis to the HIV epidemic that dominated US public health efforts in the 1980-90s.

The use of opioids has skyrocketed in the US over the past 20 years. This includes prescription pain medications, heroin, and also synthetic drugs like Fentanyl. As of 2017, there were roughly 15 opioid overdose-related deaths per 100,000 people in the country, according to estimates from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Researchers are looking into opioid-related infections such as diseased heart valves. Bacteria such as *S. aureus* can enter the bloodstream as a result of needle sharing, or not cleaning the skin before injecting a drug. If the infection reaches the heart, it can damage the valves. Severe cases require a heart transplant. [Click the link to see Jacksonville's top rehab placement programs.](#)

They are also looking into the possibility that opioids themselves are making people more susceptible to infection. One study published in January looked at more than 25,000 people treated at veterans’ health facilities between 2000 and 2012. It found that people who took medium or high doses of prescription opioids for pain management were significantly more susceptible to pneumonia.

It is currently unclear if there is a correlation between opioids and the weakened immune system, but these studies suggest that it might be worth studying.

Researchers are now studying ways to improve the diagnosis and treatment of infections in opioid users, whether their infections are viral, bacterial, or fungal. They are focused on identifying the pathogens causing infections because it can go a long way in treating it properly.

Although researchers know there is a connection between opioid use and the surge in infectious diseases, the pattern of outbreaks associated with drug use is still harder to pin down compared to non-drug-related ones. This is what makes it difficult to anticipate where infections will occur.

A computer model developed by Georgiy Bobashev, a data scientist at RTI International, a non-profit research institute in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, and his colleagues might help in this regard.

The computer model simulates drug users and their social networks to predict the location of opioid-related HIV outbreaks.

The social factor is crucial, according to Bobashev, in order to predict the patterns of outbreaks. More strategies are being developed to fight this new component of the opioid epidemic.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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