

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
Secretary Alfredo Vigil, MD

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Contact: Chris Minnick  
Office: 575-528-5197; Mobile: 575-649-

**Dept. of Health Study Finds High Rate of Hepatitis C Infection Among Truck Drivers**  
*Results of the First Ever Study to Examine Truck Drivers Published the Month*

(Las Cruces) – A New Mexico Department of Health survey of long-haul truck drivers shows there are high rates of hepatitis C infection among truck drivers, many of whom are not aware they have the disease. The Department of Health conducted a study that was published in the American Journal of Public Health on September 17 of risky behaviors and infection prevalence among truck drivers between 2004 and 2006.

Dr. Steve Jenison, medical director for the Department of Health's Infectious Diseases Bureau, said studies in Africa, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America have linked the spread of sexually transmitted disease to long distance truck drivers, but little is known about the industry in the United States.

“We know from other international studies that long-haul truck drivers in some countries have high rates of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV, but we wanted to learn if that was true in the United States,” Dr. Jenison said. “What we learned is that truck drivers passing through New Mexico do not have higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases, but there was a high rate of hepatitis C infection. What was most concerning is that many of the people who are infected with hepatitis C did not know they had it.”

Researchers examined sexually transmitted infections, HIV and hepatitis B and hepatitis C virus prevalence and risk behaviors among 652 truck drivers at 11 truck stops in New Mexico. The study found that 8.5 percent of drivers tested positive for hepatitis C. In contrast, only one truck driver tested positive for HIV, one for gonorrhea and one for syphilis. Eleven percent of the truck drivers reported that they had injected drugs at least once in the past, and this was the factor that most likely accounts for the high rate of hepatitis C infection observed in this study. The study was the first in the nation to examine infection rates and high risk behaviors among truck drivers.

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne disease that infects the liver. The infection can cause liver inflammation that is often asymptomatic, but chronic hepatitis can cause cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. Hepatitis C is spread by blood-to-blood contact and there is no vaccine available. The symptoms of infection can be medically managed and patients can be cleared of the virus by a 6 to 12 month course of anti-viral medicines.

“We also learned from the study that some of the truck drivers who were hepatitis C positive also engaged in risky behavior such as binge drinking, which puts them at higher risk for complications if they have hepatitis C,” Dr. Jenison said.

Dr. Jenison said the goal of the study is to learn about how diseases are transmitted and how public health officials can reduce the spread of infections. For the trucking industry, Dr. Jenison said drivers should consider getting tested for hepatitis C and seek medical advice and treatment if they have the disease. This is especially the case for truck drivers who have ever used injection drugs or who received blood transfusions prior to 1992.

“Despite the low measured prevalence of sexually transmitted infections in the study, many drivers reported sexual behaviors that would place them at risk for acquiring these infections, including HIV,” Dr. Jenison said. “Truck drivers who have contact with casual partners or commercial sex workers while on the road should follow safer sex practices including consistent condom use.”

The New Mexico Department of Health works with providers around the state through Project ECHO to treat people with hepatitis C. Project ECHO uses teleconferences, telemedicine and the internet to help providers throughout the state care for people with chronic health conditions in their communities. The program is a partnership between the Department of Health, the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, the New Mexico Corrections Department, and the New Mexico Primary Care Association.

The study was done in collaboration with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through a cooperative agreement with the Association for Prevention Teaching and Research. To read the study, go online to [http://www.ajph.org/first\\_look.shtml](http://www.ajph.org/first_look.shtml)

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