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National Hepatitis Testing Day draws attention to Oregon's high rates of Hepatitis C

May 19th is National Hepatitis Testing Day, which aims to raise awareness of viral hepatitis and encourage testing for people to learn their hepatitis status. HIV Alliance, a local nonprofit that provides free hepatitis C testing, is using the opportunity to focus on Oregon's high rates of hepatitis C and death related to the virus.

Hepatitis C can cause liver cirrhosis and cancer if left untreated. Consistently between 2014 and 2018, Oregon had the third highest rate in the US of mortality from hepatitis C. According to the Oregon Health Authority, roughly 5,000 Oregonians were diagnosed with chronic hepatitis C annually between 2016 and 2019. During the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, reported cases have dropped to less than 4,000 each year.

HIV Alliance warns that this may not indicate fewer cases. Rather, access to testing and healthcare broadly has been heavily impacted by the pandemic, and people may not be accessing the testing they need. Out of 850 rapid hepatitis C tests provided by HIV Alliance during 2021, 22% were positive for the virus.

The CDC recently changed guidelines to recommend hepatitis C testing for all adults at least once in their life and all pregnant people during each pregnancy. People at greatest risk include people who inject or have ever injected drugs, people who have received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before July 1992, and people living with HIV. The majority of hepatitis C cases in Oregon are attributed to injection drug use.

In response to Oregon's high rates of hepatitis C, HIV Alliance has expanded its focus over the last decade to now include a range of hepatitis C care and prevention services. The agency's Eugene-based medical clinic offers low-barrier hepatitis C treatment and other supports for patients. It primarily serves people who experience behavioral health and housing related barriers to care. The organization also partners with Oregon Health and Science University to provide telehealth treatment for hepatitis C in Southern Oregon along with peer support services. HIV Alliance's syringe exchange program serves seven counties and works to prevent viral hepatitis and infections like HIV among people who inject drugs.

HIV Alliance will be providing hepatitis C rapid testing in Eugene, Florence, Roseburg, and Grants Pass on Thursday, May 19. Additional opportunities are available in other areas of Oregon regularly throughout the week. Visit <https://hivalliance.org/prevent/testing> to view HIV Alliance's testing schedules and locations.

Amanda McCluskey (Senior Program Director) Rebecca Noad (Prevention and Education Manager) and Dane Zahner (Prevention and Harm Reduction Manager) are available for interviews.

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