

PREVALENCE OF HEPATITIS B SEROLOGICAL MARKERS AND KNOWLEDGE OF AND ATTITUDES TO HEPATITIS B VACCINATION AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN GEORGIA

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Background:

Georgia has a high prevalence of injection drug use, with 2.2% or 51,000 people who inject drugs (PWID). In 2022, 2.5% of PWID were hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) reactive, and 10.6% reported being vaccinated against hepatitis B. This study assessed knowledge and attitudes toward hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection and vaccination among PWID in Georgia and evaluated their susceptibility and need for vaccination.

Methods:

A cross-sectional study was conducted among adult (aged 18–64 years) harm reduction service beneficiaries in Tbilisi and Zugdidi during April–July 2023. Eligible participants had injected drugs within the past month and provided informed consent. Participants completed face-to-face interviews on perceived HBV susceptibility and vaccine awareness. Blood specimens were tested for HBV seromarkers and classified as previous exposure (hepatitis B core antibody [anti-HBc] positive, HBsAg negative, HBV surface antibody [anti-HBs] positive), current infection (anti-HBc positive, HBsAg positive, anti-HBs negative), previous vaccination (anti-HBc negative, HBsAg negative, anti-HBs ≥ 10 IU/ml), and susceptible (anti-HBc negative, HBsAg negative, anti-HBs negative).

Results:

Of 300 participants, 85.7% were aged >35 years, 96.3% were men, and 65.7% were unemployed. Of 187 (62.3%) aware of an effective hepatitis B vaccine, 21.4% believed it was only partially effective. Overall, 78.0% considered themselves at risk of HBV infection. However, 91.0% (n=273) reported being unvaccinated, among whom main barriers to vaccination included belief that vaccination is unnecessary (30.7%), lack of awareness (19.0%), and fear of side effects (18.3%). Of 300 participants, 3.7% had current HBV infection, 41.0% were previously exposed, 8.0% previously vaccinated, and 47.3% susceptible to HBV infection. Among 24 previously vaccinated, 66.7% were unaware of their vaccination status.

Conclusion:

Nearly half of PWID in Georgia were susceptible to HBV infection, with low vaccination rates and awareness. These findings underscore the need for targeted HBV education and vaccination efforts within harm reduction programs.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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