

## Health

## 'Age limit now 21 for cigs'

## To battle opioid crisis, some track overdoses in real time

ALBANY, NY, Dec 28, (AP): Drug overdose patients rushed to some emergency rooms in New York's Hudson Valley are asked a series of questions: Do you have stable housing? Do you have food? Times and location of overdoses are noted, too.

The information is entered into a new overdose-tracking system that provides near real-time glimpses into the ravages of the opioid-fueled drug crisis. The Hudson Valley Interlink Analytic System is among a number of surveillance systems being adopted around the country by police, government agencies and community groups. While the number of drug overdose deaths appears to have fallen nationally in 2018 for the first time in nearly three decades, the overdose death rate remains about seven times higher than a generation ago.

## Overdose

If there's a spike in overdoses, the system will send text alerts to health administrators and community workers. And system users can see what drugs are being abused for faster and focused responses to the ever-evolving problem.

"We can't get ahead of a situation that's already passed. This kind of information has to be given almost instantaneously or else the narcotics that we're trying to track have already been sold, and they're already on to the next batch," said Sgt. Julio Fernandez of the New York National Guard's Counter-drug Task Force, which helped usher in the system.

The Hudson Valley system was adopted earlier this year by two hospitals north of New York City serving areas hard-hit by drug abuse: St Luke's Cornwall Hospital in Newburgh and Ellenville Regional Hospital. Administrators say nearby Catskill Regional Medical Center is ready to enter information and that Orange Regional Medical Center in Middletown will begin data entry next month. Administrators are talking to other hospitals in the region about signing up.

When a patient comes in, a nurse or another worker enters data about the overdose and the drug. Patients retain their legally required anonymity, but system users can still glean general information about the age, gender and housing status of people in trouble.

The idea is to "get that information out there as efficiently and as quickly as we can," said Daniel Maughan, a senior vice president at St Luke's.

## Prevention

The data has helped track the rise of fentanyl being laced into cocaine, Fernandez said. Dawn Wilkin, director of prevention services at Catholic Charities of Orange, Sullivan, & Ulster, said the system has guided workers on where to conduct needle cleanup within days, instead of waiting a week or more.

Wilkin said there have been no text alerts to warn of a spike in overdoses sent out yet, likely due in part to a drop in overdoses locally.

Participation by patients is voluntary. If someone is unresponsive

or unwilling to answer questions, workers enter the data that's available. Kathy Sheehan, director of emergency and trauma services at St Luke's, said many patients cooperate, though there are just as many others who are not willing to speak.

"They're private," she said, "they're maybe afraid of the repercussions."

Around the country, workers on the front lines of the opioid crisis are looking to speedier data access as part of their prevention strategy.

In northeastern Minnesota, a pilot system involving six hospitals uses information from case reports submitted by emergency room staff to quickly provide health officials with warnings about overdose clusters or unusual symptoms. The Minnesota Drug Overdose and Substance Use Surveillance Activity system also analyzes blood or urine samples from a subset of patients to be able to detect patient exposure to fentanyl or other substances.

## System

In Michigan, the System for Opioid Overdose Surveillance processes data from medical examiners and from EMS encounters in which overdose-reversing naloxone was administered. The system maintained by the University of Michigan Injury Prevention Center sends out reports to county health departments and other users.

The most ubiquitous surveillance system is the Overdose Detection Mapping Application Program, or ODMAP. The system allows first responders and others to enter data on suspected overdoses, including locations, times, naloxone dosages, victim ages and suspected drugs. The system designed by the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area program in the Washington/Baltimore area sends out spike alerts to police and other agencies. Launched as a pilot in January 2017, it is now in 48 states.

## Also:

**NEW YORK:** The new law enacted last week by Congress also applies to electronic cigarettes and vaping products that heat a liquid containing nicotine.

The provision raising the legal limit from 18 to 21 nationwide was in a massive spending bill passed by Congress and signed by the president on Dec 20. About one-third of states already had their own laws restricting tobacco sales to people 21 and older.

"This is a major step in protecting the next generation of children from becoming addicted to tobacco products," new FDA commissioner **Dr Stephen Hahn** tweeted last week.

Usually, new legislation doesn't take effect right away. The change simply increased the age limit in existing law, so it was able to go into effect immediately, a spokesman for the Food and Drug Administration said Friday.

Anti-smoking advocates said the higher age limit should make it more difficult for young people to get tobacco, particularly high school students who had friends or classmates over 18 buy for them.



In this Aug 26, 2019 file photo, Salt Lake City Mosquito Abatement District biologist Nadja Reissen examines a mosquito in Salt Lake City. Eastern equine encephalitis, a rare and deadly mosquito-borne illness, saw a small but worrisome increase in the summer of 2019. The numbers remain very low — just 38 cases in 2019. But that's more than double the annual number in the past decade, and it included 15 deaths. (AP)

## Infectious terrors of past continue to recede

## 'Tough year' for measles, infectious diseases in US

NEW YORK, Dec 28, (AP): This year, the germs roared back.

Measles tripled. Hepatitis A mushroomed. A rare but deadly mosquito-borne disease increased.

And that was just the United States.

Globally, there was an explosion of measles in many countries, an unrelenting Ebola outbreak in Africa and a surge in dengue fever in Asia. There were also backslides in some diseases, like polio, that the world was close to wiping out.

"It's been a tough year for infectious diseases," said Dr Jonathan Mermin of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A look back at some US disease trends in 2019:

## Measles

There were nearly 1,300 cases of measles in the US through November, that's the largest number in 27 years. There were no deaths but about 120 people ended up in the hospital.

This from a disease that vaccines had essentially purged from the country for a decade.

"How can we have gone from eliminating the disease to reviving a disease? It's mind-shattering that we would go in that direction," said US Rep Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn, who heads a congressional subcommittee that oversees public health spending.

Three-quarters of this year's cases were in Orthodox Jewish communities in or near New York City. As do most US outbreaks, it started with travelers infected overseas who spread it to people who hadn't gotten a measles vaccine.

Vaccination rates in New York are good, overall. But it was a shock to learn how low they had dipped in some places, said Dr Patricia Schnabel Ruppert, health commissioner in Rockland County, north of New York City. Distrust of vaccines had taken root in segments of the Orthodox community. The county took the unusual step of barring thousands of unvaccinated children from dozens of schools.

## Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A tends to be thought of as a kind of food poisoning, often traced to an infected restaurant worker with poor hygiene. But the latest wave be-

gan in San Diego among homeless people and people who use illicit drugs. In 2017, there were 1,500 cases in four states tied to the outbreak. This year, it boomed to 17,000 in 30 states, with Florida and Tennessee the hardest hit.

Hepatitis A usually is not considered a fatal disease, but it can be for people whose livers are already damaged by hepatitis C or long-time drinking. Nearly 200 died this year.

A vaccine for hepatitis A is now included in routine childhood vaccines, but most adults are too old to have gotten it as children. Attempts to give the vaccine to vulnerable adults met resistance, said the CDC's Dr Neil Gupta, who tracks the outbreaks.

Public health workers took the shots out to people in drug rehab centers and to shelters and the streets to reach the homeless. Gupta said he's optimistic that cases may drop in 2020.

## Eastern Equine Encephalitis

This rare and deadly illness saw a small but worrisome increase last summer. Eastern equine encephalitis got its name because it was first seen in horses in Massachusetts.

The virus is spread to people through mosquitoes that mostly feed on infected birds but sometimes bite humans. Few people who are infected get sick but those who do can develop a dangerous infection of the brain, spinal cord or surrounding tissues. There is a vaccine for horses, not people.

The numbers remain very low — just 38 cases this year. But that's more than double the annual number in the past decade, and it included 15 deaths. That prompted health warnings in some places and even calls to cancel outdoor events scheduled for dusk, when mosquitoes are most active.

Among those who died was Scott Mosman, an outdoors-loving mechanical engineer in Taunton, Massachusetts. It's not clear when Mosman was bitten by a mosquito, but it likely happened while working in his yard, said Sami Fam, a friend and former colleague.

"He's kind of a big kid who always thought he was invincible," said Fam.

The 58-year-old Mosman died in October.

Better diagnosing may be a contributor to the increase in reports of eastern

equine encephalitis and a few other diseases spread by bites from mosquitoes or ticks. Some also ebb and flow in cycles. But researchers say larger increases also may be related to climate change, as warmer weather can contribute to booms in insects and a northward expansion of where they live.

## The Good News

This year, some infectious diseases did trend down. Preliminary reports show Legionnaires' disease down by about 20%. West Nile virus cases fell two-thirds, compared to 2018. And some other infectious terrors of the past, including tuberculosis, continued to recede.

And the nation is a far cry from where it was at the beginning of the 20th century, when roughly 50% of US deaths were attributed to infectious diseases. Today, it's more like 5%.

Improvements in sanitation and nutrition, and medical advances like antibiotics and vaccines, are credited with driving down deaths from infectious diseases over the last century or so. But sometimes new threats emerge as others wane.

"There may have been a real surge of optimism after the eradication of smallpox in 1980," but then a few years later AIDS came in, said Stephen Morse, a Columbia University expert on the spread of diseases.

Today's growing resistance to vaccines and other prevention efforts is a "very worrisome trend," he said.

## Also:

**ATLANTA:** Georgia's public health agency is urging residents to get flu shots without delay, saying illnesses are widespread across the state.

The Georgia Department of Public Health has confirmed that more than 200 people statewide have been hospitalized because of flu this season, and two people have died from flu-related sickness. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates there have been more than 2.6 million flu-related illnesses nationwide.

Everyone older than 6 months should get a flu shot, Georgia's public health commissioner, **Dr Kathleen Toomey**, said in a news release. Toomey said it usually takes two weeks after the shot

for a person's body to develop the antibodies needed to fight the flu.

Health officials say people can also reduce flu risks by frequently washing their hands, avoiding touching their faces and by staying home from work or school if they have flu-like symptoms.

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**CHICAGO:** New HIV diagnoses in Chicago continue to go down and have declined for four consecutive years, according to figures released by Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Chicago's health department.

The 734 new diagnoses reported in 2018 among Chicago residents are the lowest number since 1988, health officials said Monday.

"A world where we end the HIV epidemic is within our reach, and these latest findings prove that Chicago is on track to end the HIV epidemic by 2030," Lightfoot said in a release. "Chicagoans will not rest until we achieve functional zero, meaning we will continue to increase access to care and services, expand our work with community partners and strengthen the quality of life for every city resident."

Chicago Department of Public Health's 2019 HIV/STI surveillance report shows 23,580 people were living with HIV through the end of 2017, the year for which most current data is available.

The health department's HIV Services Portfolio is awarding more than \$40 million annually to over 60 community-based and health care organizations.

"Our funding follows the epidemic to ensure resources are allocated to areas and populations with the greatest needs," health department acting commissioner **Dr. Allison Arwady** said. "Through integration of funding and programming, we can reach more people and make sure no one falls through the cracks."

While HIV rates are declining in Chicago, other sexually transmitted infections are rising. More than 30,600 cases of chlamydia, nearly 12,700 cases of gonorrhea and 877 primary and secondary cases of syphilis were reported to the health department in 2018.

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