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PRESS RELEASE

Save Defenders of Ukraine

Results of the first all-Ukrainian hepC testing among the Ukrainian soldiers who came back from the war zone in the East of Ukraine or were conscripted to the military forces

Almost 4% of the soldiers who came back from the war zone in the East of Ukraine or were conscripted to the military forces received positive results of their tests for hepC virus (HCV)! In total, there were **4,367 soldiers of the Armed Forces and the National Guard of Ukraine** tested during the first all-Ukrainian hepC testing campaign organized by the [International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine](http://aidalliance.org.ua) in collaboration with its partner organizations in **68 hospitals**, military bases and other venues in Kyiv and 23 regions of Ukraine.

Those are the results which were made public on 13 October 2015, on the eve of the Ukraine's Defenders Day, during the press briefing held in the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center.

The average rate of hepC infections among the soldiers subordinated to the Ministry of Defense exceeded **5%**. In the Main Military Clinical Hospital in Kyiv this rate reached **10%**!

The testing was accompanied by a survey run by TNS, which covered about **3.5 thousand** of all the soldiers tested. As a result, risk factors were identified, leading to the spread of infection.

Results of all-Ukrainian hepC testing among soldiers of the Armed Forces and the National Guard of Ukraine

Hep C – 3,9%



68 venues to test for hep C



4 367 soldiers tested



171 have hep C



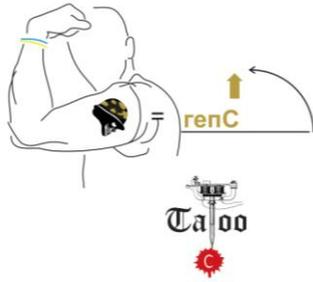
2,6%



4,5%



Olha Tkachenko, volunteer and project coordinator of the Legal Hundred CSO: "The results of the survey held by TNS demonstrate negative trends related to the increase in the spread of hepC. In particular, among those conscripted to the military forces who had not been in the war zone the share of people with positive test results was 2.6%, among those who had already participated in the military operations this rate was 4.5%, and among those who received treatment – up to 5%. Most of the soldiers who took part in the testing noted that they had not gone through any serious medical manipulations: 81% of the respondents had not been wounded, 92% stated that they had not had any blood transfusions, 98% had not had any transplantations of body organs or tissues, and 92% had not received any dentist's services.



So what are the risk factors? In the war zone, these are first of all tattoos. 23% of the respondents said that they made tattoos or piercing before they went to the war zone or during their stay there. It should be noted that 59% of all the persons tested were married or lived in civil marriages, so if they get viral infections it will automatically endanger their family members as those are the men of most reproductive age (the average age is **34 years old**)”.

But the risks of getting infected are associated not only with tattoos or medical manipulations. In the area of military conflict, sometimes it is just not possible to avoid contact with other people's blood in case of being wounded or providing medical aid to those who have been wounded. **Lubov Strubchevska** does not conceal her emotions. **She is the mother of a 31-year-old soldier of the 128th brigade from Vinnytsia oblast**, who came home with hepC after being wounded: “In July 2014, when my son was conscripted, he went through all tests which confirmed he was not infected. Four months after, following a severe contusion near the town of Zolote he came back home alive, but in the hospital he was diagnosed with acute hepC. He told that there was a lot of blood, they had to carry their wounded fellows away, having no protection or disinfection means, even having no access to water. But now, when he is hundreds kilometers away from the war zone, hepC can kill him if he does not receive timely and effective treatment!”

Today the state budget of Ukraine does not cover hepC treatment with innovative drugs. The efficacy of interferon treatment which is provided by the state in limited amounts does not exceed 50%, is long-term and is associated with severe side effects. But if peginterferon is combined with the innovative direct-acting antiviral agent, sofosbuvir, treatment success rates can be more than 90%, with the period of treatment reduced to 3 months and the number of side effects significantly decreased.

“Today, with support of Alliance, **172 patients with hepC in Ukraine**, including several soldiers, already receive treatment with the innovative drug – sofosbuvir – at absolutely no charge to them. Due to the support of the Ministry of Defense and the National Guard, with “identification” based on the results of the all-Ukrainian testing among the Ukrainian soldiers of an actually new key population, we now have every reason to ask international donors to allocate several hundreds of treatment courses to save the lives of our defenders. However, the state, from its side, has to quickly and efficiently prepare the respective treatment basis, amend the outdated treatment guidelines and re-allocate the accompanying medicines. It will save the lives of hundreds of soldiers and will convince their parents that the state cares about its defenders”, commented on the results of testing its initiator, **Pavlo Skala, Associate Director: Policy and Partnership of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine**.

The issues related to the spread of socially dangerous infectious diseases in the war zone which endanger dozens of thousands soldiers, are, unfortunately, not limited to hepC only. The survey held during the testing campaign showed that **61% of respondents did not use condoms during the most recent sexual contact, and 18% of them had sex with casual partners**. Considering the significant intensification of sex work at the both sides of the war zone, lack of condoms in military units and in individual aid kits, the risks of rapid rise in the spread of sexually transmitted infections require adequate and timely response.

Jacek Tyszko, UNAIDS Country Coordinator in Ukraine also expressed concerns from the side of the relevant UN agencies: “We are concerned about the facts presented today by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine as well as numerous signals of the potential scale of this problem, which we receive from our partners “in the field”. The situation should be studied to respond with adequate and timely prevention efforts. Military units have all the required conditions, such as discipline, hierarchy and coordination of activities, to implement effective prevention programs. The UN, in its turn, has been working in armed conflicts and with military personnel all over the world for 70 years, and we are ready to share our knowledge and best practices to protect the health of young men and women who serve in the troops.”

One of the priorities of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance in Ukraine is fighting the HCV epidemic in Ukraine through scaling up HCV diagnostics and treatment among most-at-risk groups and general population. In 2012, the all-Ukrainian “Demand Treatment!” advocacy campaign was launched by Alliance Ukraine with the aim to scale up access to HCV testing and treatment in Ukraine. In 2015, the Practice Center on HIV, Hepatitis C and Drug Use, hosted by Alliance Ukraine, launched an international campaign “Unite To Eliminate HepC: Know It, Test It, Treat It”. This campaign calls to unite in order to raise awareness and mobilize the community for access to affordable hepatitis C testing, diagnostics and treatment <http://www.aidsalliance.org.ua/hepc/>.