



Hepatitis C Elimination in Georgia

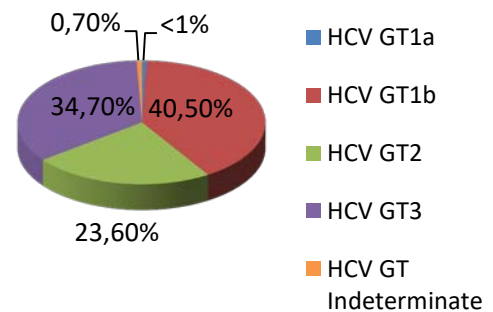
July 28, 2022

Based on available data, Georgia was among the countries with high hepatitis C (HCV) Prevalence, however, the reasons of the high burden of the disease have not been studied sufficiently. Collapse of the health care system in 1990s, sub-optimal quality standards of health services had negative influence on safe injection practices, infection control and blood safety in health care settings over the years. All these conditions along with the widespread practice of needle sharing among people who inject drugs (PWID) contributed to the spread of HCV in the general population.

According to the population-based seroprevalence survey, conducted by the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2015, estimated national seroprevalence of hepatitis C is 7.7% and the prevalence of active disease was 5.4%. The survey aimed to estimate the prevalence of HCV infection in the adult population, to assess risk factors for HCV infection in Georgia, describe circulating HCV genotypes and identify knowledge and perceptions towards hepatitis, its prevention and treatment.

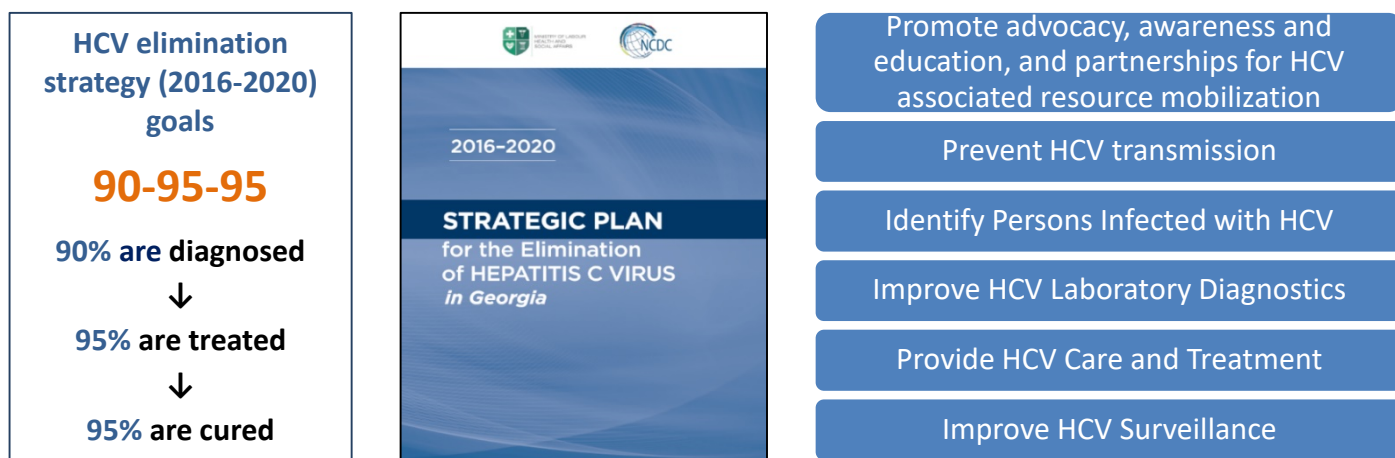
Characteristic	n	Weighted %	Estimated number of adults ≥ 18
Anti-HCV+	425	7.7%	215,000
HCV RNA+	311	5.4%	150,300

HCV Genotypes



The Government of Georgia, with strong support from US CDC and other international partners, declared intention to eliminate hepatitis C in Georgia. The national Hepatitis C elimination program became operational in 2015.

- In 2011-2014, the Government of Georgia substantially stepped up its efforts against hepatitis C by implementing free of charge hepatitis C treatment with combination of pegylated interferon and ribavirin for HIV/HCV co-infected patients (funded under the Global Fund HIV Program since 2011); Free of charge hepatitis C treatment was expanded to the penitentiary system and treatment was co-financed for the rest of the population.
- After US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved etiotropic treatment with direct-acting antiviral agent (DAA) Sofosbuvir in 2013, the Georgian Government started negotiation with the manufacturer pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences, Inc., regarding possible elimination of HCV in Georgia. Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Georgia and US pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences, Inc. was officially signed on April 21, 2015.
- Under the MoLHSA, a special commission on HCV was established that is in charge of overall coordination of national HCV elimination movement. In addition, a working group of experts was created to elaborate national strategy and action plan for HCV elimination. National Hepatitis C Elimination Action Plan for 2016-2020 was developed.



Georgia has increased efforts to strengthen each direction of the strategy:

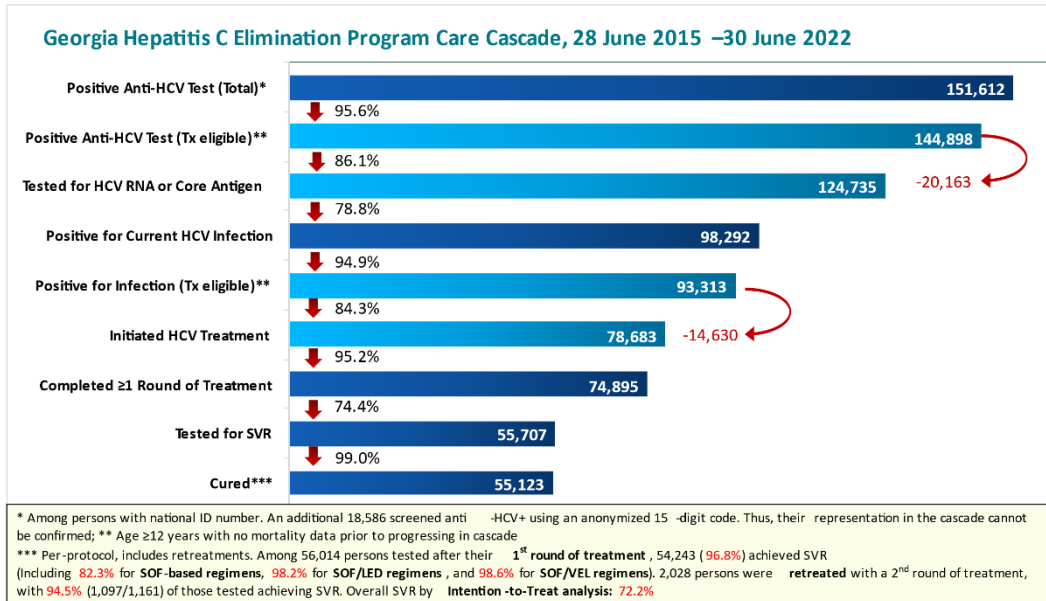
- NCDC has started massive awareness campaigns. Short text messages (SMS) are regularly sent to invite population to the HCV screening. HCV Hotline was established at NCDC.
- Infection control and prevention monitoring and evaluation system has been established in medical and non-medical facilities. PWID and their sexual partners receive Regular screening services. Unified Blood Donor Electronic Database was developed. Nucleic acid amplification testing (NAT) was implemented in the safe blood program.
- Georgian government scaled up screening activities. More than 1000 sites, including inpatient and outpatient facilities, prisons, Georgian Harm Reduction Network (GHRN) centers, etc., provide HCV screening across the country. A unified electronic screening registry was created which captures data from all national and local HCV screening programs throughout Georgia. Data from the screening and treatment programs are linked by a unique identification number. Occupations that are subject to for mandatory screening were expanded.
- Georgia initiated an integrated TB/HIV/HCV screening program at primary healthcare centers (PHC). The program was first piloted in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region and later was expanded to the entire country. 97% of the target population got tested in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti. To promote this initiative, partnership with local government was established, which provided additional funding and ensured sustainability. The program significantly facilitated to increase the number of people who were screened for the three diseases. Integrated screening has continued in 2020-2021 regardless the COVID-19 pandemic.
- NCDC referral laboratory – Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research – conducts research activities for the simplification of HCV diagnostics, including studies on HCV cAg and various PCR approaches. External quality assessment system has been introduced.
- Currently 39 centers in different cities (including 1 center in penitentiary system) are providing diagnostic and treatment services to the elimination program beneficiaries. Primary healthcare doctors are also involved in

In 2016, the Clinical and Scientific Committees were established with the aim of providing the volunteer leadership for the transparency and coordination of the research activities within Hepatitis C Elimination Program in Georgia. In total, 83 proposals were reviewed and 75 were approved by the Scientific Committee by the end of March 2022. Clinical guideline for management of hepatitis C infection was elaborated by the Clinical Committee and is regularly updated.

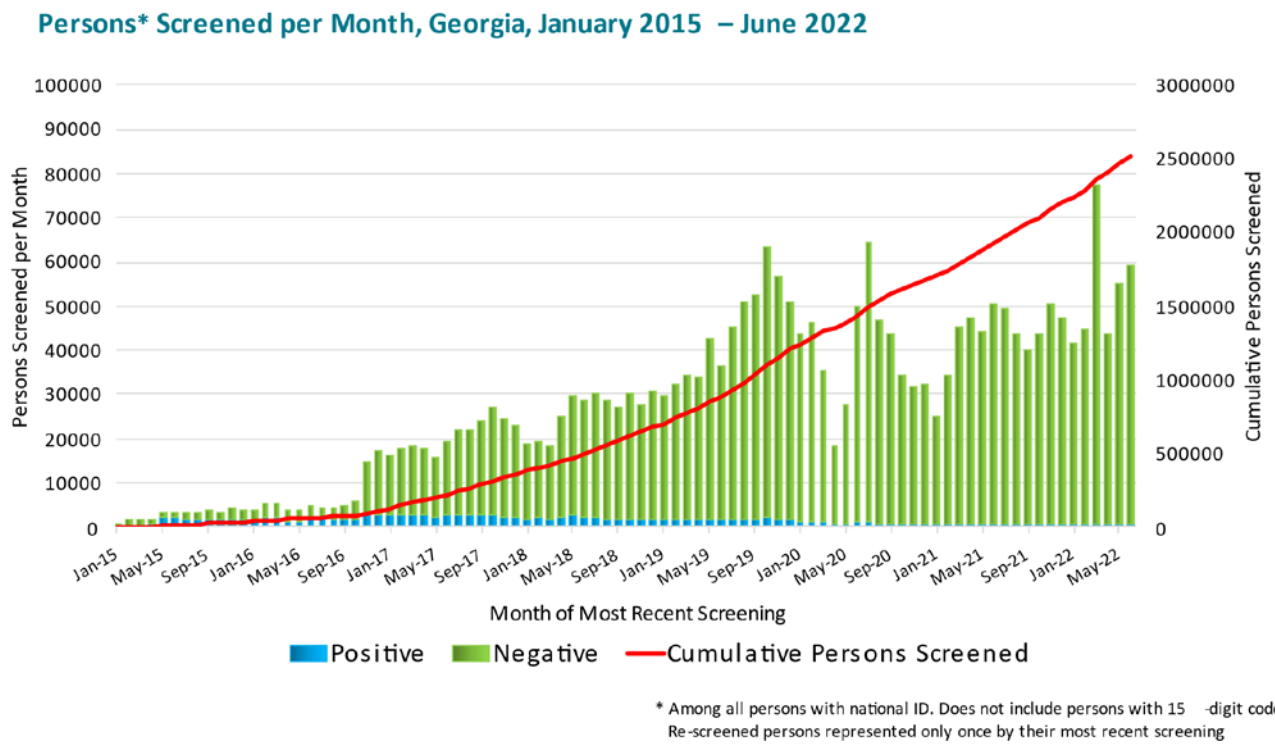
NCDC supported the establishment of the ‘Cured Hepatitis C Patients’ Association’ which aims to facilitate the HCV Elimination Program by raising awareness, reducing the hepatitis C-associated stigma and discrimination among the population.

Since 2014, National HCV Elimination Workshops are conducted every year, during the spring period. In 2015, the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) composed of 12 international experts, was established with support of the CDC. Every year, TAG discusses the progress towards elimination, monitors and evaluates indicators and provides recommendations on long-term elimination strategy.

Since 2014, special side meetings are organized on annual meetings of European Association for the Study of the Liver (EASL) to discuss the progress towards HCV elimination in Georgia.



- Since 2015
- over **4,7 million** HCV screenings
 - **2,3 million** persons tested
 - **151,000** anti-HCV positive cases identified
 - **20,000** anti-HCV+ individuals to follow-up and link to care
 - Over **78,000** patients started treatment
 - Cure rate – **99%**



Liver Institute and Foundation for Education and Research (LIFER) funded implementation of Project ECHO in Georgia. ECHO is a telemedicine platform which allows clinicians to share expert-level knowledge and experience.

- ❖ Georgia was awarded the title of **NOhep Visionary** for the European Region at the World Hepatitis Summit in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on November 1st, 2017. The NOhep Visionaries Programme is a global campaign which engages governments to scale-up successful approaches to elimination and share key learnings, accelerating progress towards eliminating viral hepatitis by 2030.
- ❖ Georgia was awarded as a **center of excellence in viral hepatitis elimination** at the EASL International Liver Congress, 2019.
- ❖ In 2021, World Health Organization (WHO), in partnership with CDC, conducted an orientation meeting to introduce viral hepatitis elimination validation instrument. Georgia will be **one of the first countries to implement the instrument**.
- ❖ CDC director, Rochelle P. Walensky recognized the excellent partnership with Georgian HCV elimination program with **the Honor Awards**.
- ❖ Partnerships in the Georgian HCV Elimination Program are expanding, including the support of the organizations such as CDC, WHO, World Hepatitis Alliance, EASL, NOhep movement, University of Bristol, The Global Fund, Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND), LIFER and other.

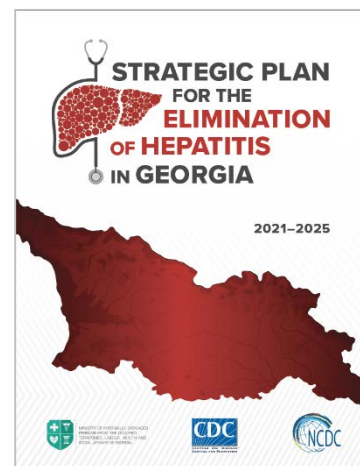


	Adults 2015	Adults 2021	Children 2021
Anti-HCV	7.7%	6.8 %	0%
HCV RNA	5.4%	1.8 %	0%
Anti-HBc	25.9%	22.6 %	0.7%
HBsAg	2.9%	2.7 %	0.03%

- To assess the elimination program, as well as to study the hepatitis B and C prevalence and risk-factors, in 2021 nationwide serosurvey on hepatitis B, C, and SARS-CoV-2 was conducted with CDC's support. Based on the

results, the prevalence of active HCV infection is 1.8% among adults, while cases have not been found in children. In 6 years, the **prevalence of chronic HCV infection has decreased by 67%** (from 5.4% in 2015 to 1.8% in 2021). The survey also showed impressive results in terms of hepatitis B – prevalence of HBV is significantly lower among children (0,03%) compared to the adults, which indicates the successful implementation of the vaccination program.

- Georgia's HCV Elimination Program has accomplished an impressive scale-up of treatment, which has already impacted the HCV burden. Georgia has committed to eliminating hepatitis C and is on track to meet WHO's viral hepatitis elimination targets. The Hepatitis Elimination Program in Georgia serves as a global example, showcasing the importance of partnerships, political commitment, country investment, and community network empowerment for the successful implementation of elimination programs. The new Strategic Plan for the Elimination of Hepatitis in Georgia, 2021-2025 was released in September to guide the program through elimination. Hopefully, Georgia will be one of the first countries to achieve HCV elimination.



დაავადებათა კონტროლისა და
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