

# 5.2 Hepatitis C

## Summary

Number of cases in 2007: 1,558  
Crude notification rate: 36.7/100,000 population  
Number of cases in 2006: 1,220

The hepatitis C virus is primarily transmitted through sharing contaminated equipment when injecting drugs or through the receipt of unscreened blood or blood products. Sexual, occupational and perinatal transmission can also occur but are less common. Infection is initially asymptomatic in approximately 90% of cases, but between 60 and 85% of those infected fail to clear the virus and develop chronic infection.

Hepatitis C became a notifiable disease in Ireland in 2004 and the number of cases reported each year since then has been high. Notifications increased by 28% to 1,558 in 2007, compared to 1,220 in 2006 (figure 1). This corresponds to a crude notification rate of 36.7/100,000 population. All cases were laboratory confirmed.

The sex distribution of cases was very similar to previous years with a strong predominance of male cases (figure

1). In 2007, 63% (n=979) of cases were male, 35% (n=551) were female and sex was not known for 28 cases. The age profile was similar for both sexes, with the highest notification rates in young to middle aged adults. Seventy two percent (n=1,124) of cases were aged between 25 and 44 years and 92% (n=1,427) were aged between 20 and 54 years. The median age for females was younger (31) than that for males (34) (figure 1).

The geographic distribution of cases was skewed, with the HSE-E reporting 77% of all cases (n=1,206). Their age-standardised notification rate, of 73.8/100,000 population, was approximately four times that of the next highest area (figure 2).

An enhanced surveillance system for hepatitis C was implemented in 2007 and some risk factor data were identified for 42% of cases (n=658). The most likely risk factor for 75% (n=496) was injecting drug use. A further 3.8% (n=25) were either prison inmates or homeless. Although mode of transmission was not reported for these cases, both groups have high prevalences of injecting drug use.

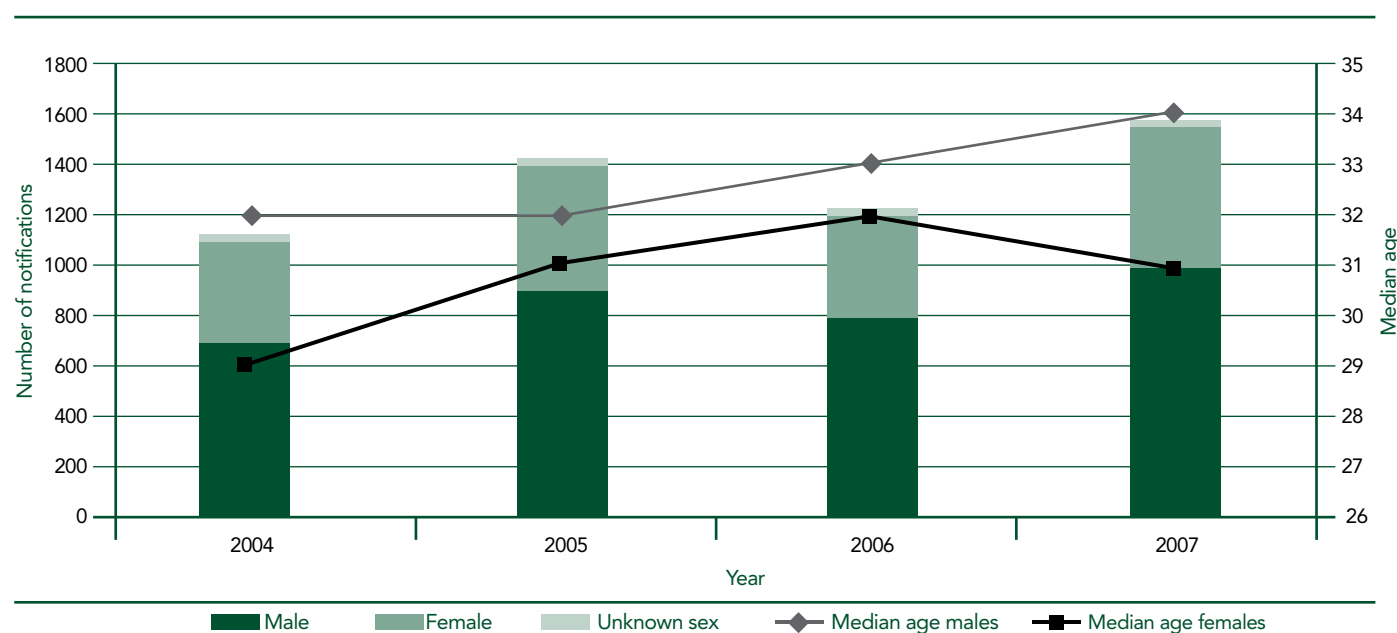


Figure 1. Number of hepatitis C notifications and median age by sex, 2004-2007

Thirty four cases (5.2%) were reported as likely to have been infected through receipt of blood or blood products. Of these, 19 were infected in Ireland. There were no further data for one of these 19, but the remainder were all infected through anti-D or blood transfusions acquired many years in the past, but were notified for the first time in 2007.

Hepatitis C notification rates may not accurately reflect incidence trends in Ireland as it is likely that a significant proportion of cases notified do not represent newly acquired infections. Infection is frequently asymptomatic initially and a large proportion of cases are diagnosed as a result of screening of people identified as being at risk. Some may have been infected for years prior to diagnosis.

In addition, current notifications may include some cases that were diagnosed before 2004 (when hepatitis C first became notifiable), for whom repeat testing has

been carried out now. Two hundred and thirty four of the cases notified in 2007 were known to have been previously diagnosed.

There is also likely to be some duplication of notifications as Departments of Public Health do not always receive full names and thus cannot always identify if a patient has been notified previously.

The figures presented in this summary are based on data extracted from the Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting (CIDR) System on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008. These figures may differ slightly from those published previously due to ongoing updating of notification data on CIDR.

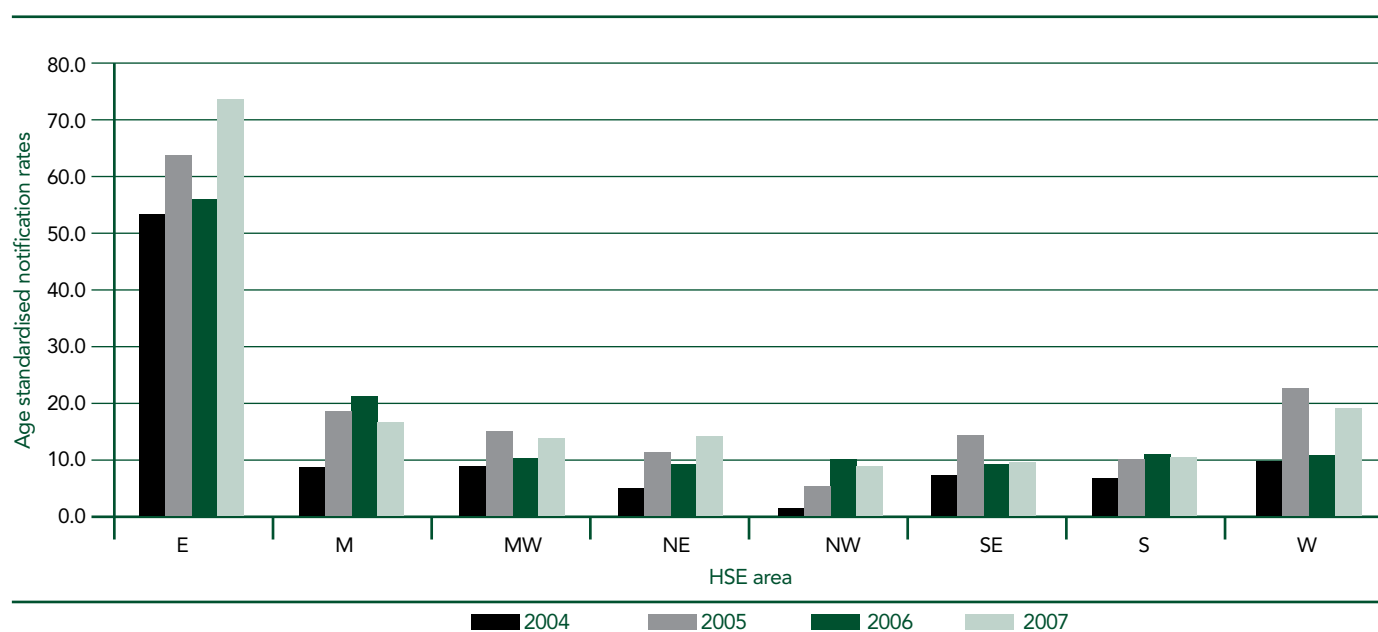


Figure 2. Age standardised notification rates/100,000 population for hepatitis C by HSE area, 2004-2007