Drip IV Therapy: Infiltrating the Wellness Industry One Drop at a Time

The Drip Bar, an IV therapy clinic and nationwide chain, recently opened in Portsmouth.

Kylie Valluzzi, Staff Writer

On a blustery Friday afternoon in early December, Tori Scearbo concocted an intravenous (IV) drip for a client. She stood in teal scrub-like joggers and Hoka sneakers, garbed in a mask, plastic gown, and gloves at the hood, an enclosed bench-like appliance designed to prevent contamination of the products. In the sterile, white, fluorescently-lit room, Scearbo waited for the vitamin vials to depressurize and sterilize in the chamber of the hood, a process that took 60 seconds. But she wasn’t concocting the IV in a hospital for a patient, she was doing so for a client at an IV therapy bar.

Scearbo was an ICU nurse for 20 years at Portsmouth Regional Hospital and for the New Hampshire Air National Guard. She left the hospital setting to work as the lead nurse at the Drip Bar in Portsmouth, New Hampshire because the hospital wasn’t a healthy environment since the COVID-19 pandemic, she said.

Scearbo isn’t alone; about 100,000 registered nurses in the U.S. left the workplace due to the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a 2023 survey by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing.

“People are just angry. I don’t think they treat nurses well. So I was just looking for a change. And I love people,” Scearbo said. “Like, I’m the person who sits at the bar and talks to strangers and, you know, they’re my best friends by the time they leave. So, this allowed me to kind of feel like I’m doing something with people but now I’m just on a different end. Like before I’m saving your life, but now it’s more of a preventative thing.”

When the vials were ready, Scearbo stuck her hands through the arm ports of the hood and brought the vitamins out of the chamber and over to the right side of the hood, where an IV bag hung from a hook. She put on a second pair of gloves and cleaned the port of the IV bag and vial caps with an alcohol wipe. Then, the IV bag was ready to be injected; Scearbo took the liquid vitamin in a syringe and injected it into the bag, repeating this with three vials. As she injected the vitamins, a pale yellow cloud swirled in the bag.
The hood stands next to a refrigerator, where some of the vitamin vials are stored. Scearbo concocts all IV bags in the hood to prevent contamination of the vitamins.

IV therapy is a way of injecting a high dosage of nutrients and minerals directly into the bloodstream. In a hospital setting, the goal of IV treatment is to replenish vitamins and minerals in the body that are deficient due to medical conditions. But in recent years, independent centers, or “bars,” offering IV therapies have opened and marketed themselves to focus on wellness.

First-time clients at the Drip Bar must have a brief telehealth appointment with one of their medical team members before getting a drip to review their medical history and ensure there won’t be any complications. Clients can then get set up for their drip in any of the seven white leather chairs that line the main room, two of which are chaise lounges, where a warmly lit crystal chandelier adorns the ceiling as contemporary pop music plays from a speaker. Beyoncé’s “Cuff It,” to be exact.

Scearbo takes their temperature, blood pressure, and blood oxygen level, then injects the IV into the client’s arm. The bag hangs from the ceiling on a pulley system. Some clients can taste the IV— it’s chalky, like a Flintstones vitamin. Some clients feel their arm get cold, as the liquid being injected into the bloodstream is room temperature, while blood itself is about 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

IV lifestyle drips range in price from $99 to $199. Health support drips start at $149 and can cost up to $329. Prices can be found on the Drip Bar website. IV therapy is generally not covered by insurance. Elevance Health (also known as Anthem) is the second-largest health insurance company in the U.S., with an enrollment of 4.6 million Americans in 2021. In New Hampshire, Anthem’s Gold plan covers home IV therapy but only “when such services are necessary as alternatives to hospitalization.” In other words, voluntarily visiting a drip bar means clients must pay out of pocket.

Launa Martin, owner of Morpha VIP, a life-coaching company, has been to several IV therapy bars in different states and visited the Drip Bar in Portsmouth in November. She enjoyed her drip experience and bought a membership plan with the Drip Bar.

“I thought that was great, as it felt like [Tori] was listening to my health issues and not just recommending the service she gets paid to support – IV therapy. I am happy to have chosen a membership and look forward to my next session,” she wrote in a five-star Google review for the Drip Bar.
The Drip Bar, founded in 2016, offers several services including IV “lifestyle” drips to target anti-aging, immunity or recovery and “health support” drips to detox heavy metals from the body or deliver doses of vitamin C. It is a nationwide franchise “focused on helping people take their healthcare beyond diet, exercise, and traditional medicine to support their physical, mental, and cellular wellness,” according to their website. There are currently 99 locations across the country.

IV therapy is part of a larger health and wellness trend spreading across the U.S. since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Portsmouth location, located at 77 Hanover Street, opened on Sept. 18, 2023. The Drip Bar began franchising in 2019, and since February 2022, 84 locations have opened.

Candace Byrnes, franchisee and owner of the Drip Bar Portsmouth sat down, cross-legged with her gray suede booties on one of the white leather chairs. A University of New Hampshire ‘02 alumna, she now lives in Stratham, New Hampshire, with her husband and three dogs.

“There's this boom happening right now in the industry and I truly think that is because of the pandemic and people having more of a focus on proactive and preventative healthcare for sure,” said Byrnes. “But our industry has been around for decades even here in the U.S. even though a lot of people didn't know about it.”

A 2022 survey from McKinsey & Company found that 50% of U.S. consumers reported wellness as a top priority in their day-to-day lives, a significant rise from 42 percent in 2020. Further, wellness services like IV therapy and red-light therapy have both seen a 50% increase in adoption since 2021, according to a 2022 wellness report from Mindbody.

The recent interest in IV therapy bars is reminiscent of the oxygen bar fad of the 1990s, where customers could get “hits” of pure, scented oxygen in hopes of relieving stress, boosting energy levels and increasing endurance during exercise.

Yet, IV therapy is not FDA-approved, meaning that no clinically validated study confirms that IV hydration therapy and/or IV vitamin therapy have any real benefit, said Gene Harkless, associate professor of nursing at the University of New Hampshire (UNH).

“My suggestion is that if someone is hungover or feeling stressed/ tired – eat well, drink water, juice, whatever and give a donation to their favorite charity rather than spend money on IV therapy. Will do a lot more good for the community and the individual,” she said in an email to The New Hampshire.

When the drip is done, Scarrow takes the client’s temperature, blood pressure and blood oxygen level once more, then they are free to go.

“We're helping people feel good,” said Byrnes. “I’ve seen people leave here and they come in not feeling their greatest and I watch them walk out and we've just helped them feel better. I love being able to do that.”

Post-pandemic, Americans are looking for ways to stay healthy and prevent illness. The Drip Bar Portsmouth and the other 98 locations across the country signify this demand, however, the question of IV therapy’s longevity remains.