Prevention & Control of Viral Hepatitis Infection:

Framework for Global Action



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I. Introduction

What is the problem?

Viral hepatitis is a global public health problem affecting millions of people every year, causing disability and death.

Overall:

- Around 500 000 000 people are chronically infected with hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV).
- Approximately 1 000 000 people die each year (~2.7% of all deaths) from causes related to viral hepatitis, most commonly liver disease, including liver cancer.¹
- An estimated 57% of cases of liver cirrhosis and 78% of cases of primary liver cancer result from HBV or HCV infection.²

Why should we be concerned?

Millions of people are living with viral hepatitis and millions more are at risk. Most people who were infected long ago with HBV or HCV are unaware of their chronic infection. They are at high risk of developing severe chronic liver disease and can unknowingly transmit the infection to other people.

Viral hepatitis places a heavy burden on the health care system because of the costs of treatment of liver failure and chronic liver disease. In many countries, viral hepatitis is the leading cause of liver transplants. Such end-stage treatments are expensive, easily reaching up to hundreds of thousands of dollars per person.³ Chronic viral hepatitis also results in loss of productivity.⁴

Some groups are at more risk of contracting viral hepatitis than others. In communities where food and sanitation services are not optimal, hepatitis A and E tend to be more common. New hepatitis B and C infections are seen more often in recipients of organs, blood, and tissue, along with persons working or receiving care in health settings, and in vulnerable groups.

In recent decades, viral hepatitis has not received the attention it deserves from the global community. Although the burden of

We are experiencing a silent epidemic today.

disease is very high, the problem has not been addressed in a serious way for many reasons, including the relatively recent discovery of the causative viruses, the mostly silent or benign nature of the disease in its early stages, and the insidious way in which it causes chronic liver disease. Decades-long delay between infection and the expression of chronic liver disease or liver cancer made it difficult to link these diseases to earlier HBV or HCV infections. All these factors have resulted in "the silent epidemic" we are experiencing today.

Is there a solution?

Affordable measures, such as vaccination, safe blood supply, safe injections, and safe food, can reduce the transmission of viral

hepatitis infections. These are detailed below. Most of these measures not only reduce the transmission of viral hepatitis but also have spill over effects on the prevention of other infectious diseases. Further, current therapies for hepatitis B and C give health care providers effective tools to combat the disease. For the first time in history, hepatitis C is curable. New therapies are also being developed for hepatitis B and C, and the future is more promising than ever.

What is WHO's response?

In 2010 the World Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA63.18, which calls for a comprehensive approach to the prevention and control of viral hepatitis . In passing this resolution, Member States recognized the tremendous burden of viral hepatitis.

Resolution WHA 63.18 stipulates that WHO work closely with Member States in the following areas:

- To develop the necessary guidelines, strategies, time-bound goals and tools for the surveillance, prevention and control of viral hepatitis
- To provide the necessary support to the development of scientific research related to the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of viral hepatitis
- To improve the assessment of global and regional economic impacts and estimates of the burden of viral hepatitis
- To mobilize support to strengthen surveillance systems, prevention and control programmes, diagnostic and laboratory capacity, and management of viral hepatitis in developing countries in an

equitable, efficient, and suitable manner

• To strengthen the WHO Safe Injection Global Network

The resolution also encourages all interested parties, from the United Nations and Member States to civil society, patient groups and the private sector, to collaborate in supporting this endeavour.

In line with WHA63.18, the WHO Secretariat established a Global Hepatitis Programme within its Department of Pandemic and Epidemic Diseases, with focal points in the six Regional Offices, to implement the resolution and attain the goals outlined in this framework.

For the first time in history, hepatitis C is curable.

Since 2011, World Hepatitis Day has been celebrated annually on 28 July. World Hepatitis Day provides a unique opportunity for communities all around the world to join together on one day to focus attention on the global health threat of hepatitis and promote actions to confront it.

This framework provides a global vision for the prevention and control of viral hepatitis and an overview of the global burden, current efforts and remaining challenges in the global response to viral hepatitis. It also outlines four axes for action with suggested approaches for Member States to adopt or adapt as they see fit.



www.worldhepatitisday.info This is **hepatitis...**



What is viral hepatitis?

Viral hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by one of the five hepatitis viruses, referred to as types A, B, C, D and E. While all of these viruses cause liver disease, they vary significantly in terms of epidemiology, natural history, prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

Hepatitis A virus (HAV) is usually transmitted by the faecal-oral route, either through person-to-person contact or ingestion of contaminated food or water. Certain sex practices can also spread HAV. Infections are in many cases mild, with most people making a full recovery and remaining immune from further HAV infections. However, HAV infections can also be severe and life threatening. Most people in areas of the world with poor sanitation have been infected with this virus. Safe and effective vaccines are available to prevent HAV infection.

Hepatitis B virus (HBV) is transmitted through exposure to infectious blood, semen, and other body fluids. HBV can be transmitted from infected mothers to infants at the time of birth, or from family members to infants in early childhood. Transmission may also occur through unsafe sexual intercourse, transfusions of HBV-infected blood and blood products. contaminated injections during medical procedures, and sharing of needles and syringes among injecting drug users. HBV also poses a risk to healthcare workers who sustain accidental needle-stick iniuries while caring for HBV-infected people. A safe and effective vaccine is available to prevent HBV infection.

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is mostly transmitted through exposure to infectious blood. This may happen through transfusions of HCV-infected blood and blood products, contaminated injections during medical procedures, and sharing of needles and syringes among injecting drug users. Sexual or interfamilial transmission is also possible, but is much less common. There is no vaccine against HCV. Both HBV and HCV can cause cancer to humans.

Antiviral agents against HBV and HCV exist. Treatment of HBV infection has been shown to reduce the risk of developing liver cancer and death.

HCV is generally considered to be a curable disease but for many people this is not the reality. Access to treatment remains a constraint in many parts of the world.

Hepatitis D virus (HDV) infections occur exclusively in persons infected with HBV. The dual infection of HDV and HBV can result in more serious disease and worse outcomes. The hepatitis B vaccine provides protection from HDV infection.

Hepatitis E virus (HEV), like HAV, is transmitted through consumption of contaminated water or food. HEV is a common cause of hepatitis outbreaks in the developing world and is increasingly recognized as an important cause of disease in developed countries. HEV infection is associated with increased morbidity and mortality in pregnant women and newborns. A safe and effective vaccine against HEV was licenced in January 2012 but is not yet widely available.

Hepatitis **B**

- About 2 000 million people have been infected with HBV worldwide
- More than 240 million worldwide are chronically infected with HBV
- Between 500 000 and 700 000 people die annually as a result of HBV infection

Hepatitis C

- Some 150 000 000
 people are chronically
 infected with HCV
- More than 350 000 people are estimated to die from HCV-related liver diseases each year

What is the global disease burden?

The group of viruses (hepatitis A, B, C, D and E) that cause acute or chronic infection and inflammation of the liver give rise to a major global public health problem.

is responsible for increased numbers of symptomatic cases in some countries and the emergence of community-wide outbreaks of hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B

HBV infection has a worldwide distribution.

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