Global Viral Hepatitis Death Rate Rivals TB and HIV

A new World Health Organization (WHO) report is the most definitive account to date of the global impact of hepatitis B and C.

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According to a new World Health Organization (WHO) report on the global state of viral hepatitis, the annual death rate of hepatitis B and C viruses (HBV/HCV) rivals those of tuberculosis (TB) and HIV, MedPage Today reports. In fact, the cumulative death rate of hep B and C is rising while the TB and HIV death rates fall.

Releasing their findings at the 52nd International Liver Congress in Amsterdam, WHO officials developed what is considered the most definitive account to date of the hep B and C epidemics.

According to the report, which focused on 2015 estimates, 1.34 million people died that year as a result of chronic HBV and HCV, a rate 22 percent higher than in 2000. A total of 328 million people were living with either virus, including 257 million with HBV and 71 million with HCV. Nine percent of those living with HBV were diagnosed and 1.1 million (0.7 percent) had started treatment. Twenty percent of those with HCV had been diagnosed and 1.1 million (1.6 percent) had started treatment.

Sixty-eight percent of HBV cases are in the Western Pacific Region and Africa; the virus is relatively rare in the Americas. The burden of HCV, on the other hand, is even across global regions.

Global coverage of the three-dose childhood HBV vaccine is currently 84 percent, close to the 90 percent WHO goal. Before the vaccine was introduced in the 1980s, the rate of chronic HBV in children under 5 was 4.7 percent; in 2015, the rate was 1.3 percent. Although the use of the recommended birth dose of the vaccine to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HBV is rising, it is still at only 39 percent coverage.

About 80 percent of global blood supplies are safe from HBV.

There is no vaccine for HCV, but recent advances in treatment for the virus have made it relatively easy to cure. The high cost of the medications, however, is a major obstacle to the effort to eradicate the disease.

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