Good and Bad News About Global Rates of HIV, Viral Hepatitis and STIs

2019 HIV cases were the lowest since 1990, and hepatitis B rates also fell, according to a WHO report. But most STIs peaked.

May 27, 2021 By Trent Straube

First, some good news: Global HIV rates in 2019 fell to the lowest yearly total since 1990. What's more, cases of hepatitis B infection also declined, and the number of people receiving treatment for hepatitis C increased by more than ninefold since 2015.

That's according to a new report by the World Health Organization (WHO) that looks at estimated rates of HIV, viral hepatitis and the four main preventable and curable sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Putting the numbers in context, the report lays out global strategies to eliminate these public health threats by 2030 and assesses efforts since 2016. It's also a call for renewed focus to tackle these issues.

Every year HIV, viral hepatitis, and sexually transmitted infections account for 2.3M deaths, and 1.2M cancers

????WHO report highlights achievements, gaps, and actions towards eliminating these diseases as public health threats by 2030 ????https://t.co/8kcVqZe0Yj pic.twitter.com/U07hKRumVt

— World Health Organization (WHO) (@WHO) May 20,

2021

The 108-page report—Global Progress Report on HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexually Transmitted Infections, 2021: Accountability for the global health sector strategies (2016–2021), actions for impact—explores how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted prevention, testing and treatment efforts but notes that many health goals were not on target even before 2019.

"The accountability report would have looked very different a year ago, before COVID-19," said Meg Doherty, MD, PhD, director of the WHO's Department of Global HIV, Hepatitis and STI Programmes, in a press release about the report. "Our progress to date demonstrates that we have the interventions and approaches to make a great impact and build back stronger against COVID-19, HIV, viral hepatitis and STIs. The report is a call to action—we have 9 years to reach our targets—we need all stakeholders to accelerate action across the three diseases to achieve our ambitious yet achievable goals by 2030.''

A closer look at the numbers in the WHO report shows:

- 1.7 million people contracted HIV in 2019, the lowest number since 1990 but significantly below the previous target of less than 500,000 by 2020.

- Hepatitis B and C caused 3 million infections and 1.1 million deaths in 2019.

- Each year, HIV, viral hepatitis and STIs account for 2.3 million deaths and 1.2 million cancers.

- 10% of people with chronic hepatitis B are diagnosed with the illness; 22% of them received treatment.

- 21% of people with hepatitis C were diagnosed, and 62% received treatment, which translates to 9.4 million people receiving hep C treatment, a more than ninefold increase since 2015.

- There were 374 million new cases of STIs per year. With the exception of congenital syphilis, which decreased, the rates of most other STIs plateaued.

A main challenge in overcoming these diseases, the report notes, is that people most at risk often lack access to related health care, such as prevention and treatment. This includes young people and others who are stigmatized by these illnesses.

In related news, see "After a Year of COVID-19, Light at the End of the Tunnel," which notes that COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths continue to drop in the United States but that a global pandemic cannot be defeated in one country.

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