Hepatitis B and NASH Next for Drug Makers After Hepatitis C Successes

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Now that new drugs can cure the hepatitis C virus (HCV) with few side effects, major drug makers, including Gilead Sciences, are focusing more attention on other liver diseases—namely the hepatitis B virus (HBV) and obesity-related liver ailments, Reuters reports.

The stakes are high for drug makers. Although hep B can be treated and controlled, there is no cure for the liver disease. An estimated 1 million people nationwide are chronically infected with HBV, and up to 40,000 Americans are newly infected each year.

The American Liver Foundation (ALF) predicts obesity-related fatty liver diseases such as non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) could affect as many as half of all Americans by 2030. ALF estimates that NASH already affects up to 30 percent of the U.S. population. NASH has no cure; doctors can only recommend patients lose weight.

New drugs could help address the advanced fibrosis and cirrhosis caused by HBV and NASH. The treatments may also be able to prevent liver cancer. If successful, the drugs could bring in as much as $10 billion annually once they're approved.

Most of these new HBV and NASH treatments are in early Phase I or Phase II clinical trials. Study results are expected as soon as 2015.

In addition to Gilead, smaller companies such as Intercept Pharmaceuticals, France's Genfit and Israel's Galmed are also in the running for new HBV and NASH drugs. Experts estimate there are as many as 20 different types of new liver disease treatments in the pipeline.

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