Hepatitis B and C May Lead to Higher Cancer Risk Than Smoking a Pack a Day

About 40% of people worldwide are not aware that viral hepatitis is a leading cause of liver cancer.

July 28, 2023 By Liz Highleyman

World Hepatitis Day, July 28, is an opportunity to raise awareness about viral hepatitis and its complications and to encourage people to get tested, get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B, and get treated for hepatitis C if needed.

According to the World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA), viral hepatitis is "one of the most deadly and neglected diseases and health crises" and "one that is claiming a life every 30 seconds."

"Every year, more than a million lives are lost to hepatitis. The theme of World Hepatitis Day 2023 is 'We're not waiting'. It's a call to accelerate elimination efforts of viral hepatitis now and the urgent need for testing and treatment for the real people who need it," WHA president Danjuma Adda said in a statement. "We're not waiting for change—we're fighting to make it happen."

The World Health Organization estimates that 296 million people worldwide are living with chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) and some 58 million have chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV). Over time, HBV and HCV can lead to serious complications, including liver fibrosis, cirrhosis, hepatocellular carcinoma (the most common type of primary liver cancer) and the need for a liver transplant. Hepatitis A virus, in contrast, usually resolves on its own without treatment and does not lead to chronic infection.

A study by Homie Razavi, PhD, and colleagues at the Center for Disease Analysis, presented at the 2023 EASL Congress in June, found that people with hepatitis B or hepatitis C "have a similar or significantly higher risk of developing cancer than someone who actively smokes one pack of cigarettes per day." The researchers concluded that HBV and HCV should be "considered as cancer-causing infections" and "international guidelines should be reconsidered accordingly."

"Hepatitis B and C infections are silent epidemics. These viral infections are cancer-causing but since infected individuals don't show any symptoms until it is too late, most infections go unnoticed," Razavi said in a WHA news release. "It is important for all of us to recognize the high

risk of cancer associated with hepatitis B and C infection and get patients linked to care. Treatment can reduce the risk of cancer by 85% or more."

A recent WHA survey found that 42% of people worldwide are unaware that viral hepatitis is one of the leading causes of liver cancer. Three quarters of those surveyed said that knowing viral hepatitis causes liver cancer would make them more likely to get tested.

Experts estimate that a majority of people with HBV or HCV are not aware of their status. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now recommends that all adults should be screened for hepatitis B at least once. The CDC also recommends that all adults should be screened for hepatitis C and recently called for a new simplified testing approach.

The WHA survey also found that 82% of respondents said knowing that hepatitis B causes cancer would make them more likely to get vaccinated. HBV vaccination is now a routine childhood immunization in many countries, and the CDC recommends the vaccine for all adults with risk factors and for anyone who wants protection. Antiviral medications can control HBV replication and reduce the risk of liver cancer and other complications, but they usually do not lead to a cure.

There is currently no vaccine for HCV, but highly effective and well-tolerated direct-acting antiviral medications can cure more than 95% of patients in two to three months. Yet most people who could benefit from hepatitis C treatment are not getting it, according to a recent CDC report.

Click here for more news about hepatitis B.

Click here for more news about hepatitis C.

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