A New Road Map to Help Countries End Hepatitis B and C by 2030

The debut of guidance from the World Health Organization includes self-testing for hepatitis C virus. [VIDEO]

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It's estimated that 58 million people are living with chronic hepatitis C across the globe, and about 1.5 million new infections occur each year. In the United States, about 3.5 million people have chronic hepatitis C, and nearly 41,200 new cases were reported in 2016, a number that's expected to increase because of the opioid epidemic.

The numbers for hepatitis B are also alarming. There are about 257 million chronic infections globally and 850,000 in the United States.

Hepatitis causes inflammation of the liver. It can lead to liver cancer, liver transplants and death. Despite effective and simple treatment, in 2019 nearly 290,000 people died globally of hepatitis C virus (HCV)—mostly from cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma, or primary liver cancer—and about 887,000 died of hepatitis B virus (HBV).

Clearly, hepatitis is a serious public health issue. That's why the World Health Organization (WHO), for the first time, released guidance for countries seeking to tackle the virus. Specifically, the WHO offers a standardized road map to help nations and stakeholders measure their efforts to eliminate hepatitis B and C. Titled Interim Guidance for Country Validation of Viral Hepatitis Elimination, the 96-page report was released this summer during the International Liver Congress (EASL 2021).

The report builds on the that set the goal of ending viral hepatitis as a health threat by 2030. Specifically, the target is for countries to reduce their incidence of hepatitis by 90% and lower hepatitis-related deaths by 65% compared with a 2015 baseline.

The new WHO guidance will help countries assess how well their plans are working. "This guidance is intended to motivate countries to take rapid and appropriate action toward viral hepatitis elimination," said Meg Doherty, MD, PhD, director of the WHO's Global HIV, Hepatitis and Sexually Transmitted Infections Programmes, in a WHO press release. "It is also important that the validation process is country-led and -driven. There are important differences across countries in their hepatitis B and C epidemics, and they will need to adapt the process and national targets to their context and affected populations."

Shortly after the WHO issued its road map for ending hepatitis, it promoted self-testing for hepatitis C and offered recommendations on hep C testing services. They were released in July during the International AIDS Society Conference.

Hep C self-testing kits will be available soon, according to a separate WHO press release, and the guide aims to prepare stakeholders for their introduction. Self-testing kits are especially helpful for people who do not have access to care—this can be the result of myriad reasons, such as living in a remote area or being stigmatized as a person at risk for the virus.

The testing guides offer advice on engaging communities, training providers, obtaining quality testing kits and more. The WHO also produced a video to promote self-testing. You can watch it at the top of this article or on YouTube.

Need a quick refresher on hepatitis? Visit the Hep Basics on Hepatitis C and Hepatitis B, which include details on transmission, treatment and more.

A WHO fact sheet offers these additional key takeaways about hep C:

- Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus.
- The virus can cause both acute and chronic hepatitis, ranging in severity from a mild illness to a serious, lifelong illness, including liver cirrhosis and cancer.
- The hepatitis C virus is a bloodborne virus, and most infections occur through exposure to blood from unsafe injection practices, unsafe health care, unscreened blood transfusions, injection drug use and sexual practices that lead to exposure to blood.
- Antiviral medicines can cure more than 95% of persons with hepatitis C infection, but access to diagnosis and treatment is low.
- There is currently no effective vaccine against hepatitis C.

In related news, Iceland became the first high-income country to meet the WHO's targets for diagnosing and treating hepatitis C.

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