WHO Releases First-Ever Global Hepatitis Testing Guidelines

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The World Health Organization (WHO) has released its first-ever global testing recommendations for viral hepatitis, following a special session at the 26th Conference of the Asian Pacific Association for the Study of Liver (APASL), held last week in Shanghai.

According to a press release, the guidance addresses testing for both hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV), which combined kill an estimated 1.4 million people worldwide every year.

The new guidelines identify whom to test, where to test, how to test and how to connect people to hepatitis care and treatment if they test positive. WHO estimates that currently more than 300 million people globally are likely living with a chronic hepatitis B or C infection but that less than 5 percent have been tested or are aware of their diagnosis.

The first part of WHO's recommendations urge the use of rapid diagnostic tests for hard-to-reach populations and targeted testing in groups most at risk for a hepatitis B or C infection. This includes people who inject drugs, people living with HIV, children whose mothers have HBV or HCV and people with symptoms or blood test results suggestive of a liver infection. The guidelines also recommend testing health workers and prison populations worldwide and offering universal hepatitis B vaccination.

WHO's guidelines also recommend that countries promote the uptake of hepatitis testing and linkage to care via trained community health or peer health workers, strengthen their lab facilities and capitalize on services and staff from exisiting testing programs, such as HIV.

The new testing guidelines follow recommendations from WHO presented in the fall of 2016 on hepatitis B and C prevention, care and access to treatment. To learn more about that, click here.

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