Viral Hepatitis Remains Difficult to Control Worldwide

Thousands of people worldwide die every day of hepatitis B and C despite advancements in prevention and treatment.

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Despite breakthroughs in hepatitis B (HBV) and hepatitis C (HCV) treatment and prevention in recent decades, the world is still falling short of the 2030 elimination goal set by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Viral hepatitis attacks the liver, which acts as the body's filter. It can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, the need for a liver transplant and death. The most common hepatitis viruses are spread via contaminated food and water (hepatitis A) and shared needles and sex (hepatitis B and C). Effective vaccines are available for hep A and B. What's more, HCV is curable in most cases; however, HBV is not.

Although experts saw a brief drop in the number of hepatitis deaths worldwide, deaths have now increased from 1.1 million in 2019 to 1.3 million in 2022, according to Vox. Combined, HCV and HBV are responsible for about 3,500 global deaths daily. Only 11 countries are on track to eliminate HCV by 2030, and none is expected to eliminate HBV in that time frame.

According to experts, stigma and lack of government action in developing countries are partly to blame for the consistent number of new HCV and HBV cases worldwide.

"If the current trends continue, by the year 2040, the number of people dying of hepatitis B and C will exceed the number of people dying globally of HIV, [tuberculosis] and malaria combined," Andrea Cox, MD, PhD, who specializes in infectious diseases, including hepatitis at Johns Hopkins University, told Vox.

Experts report that due to under-resourced health systems and stigma, countries in Africa and South Asia have the highest burden of viral hepatitis. In fact, more than 60% of new HBC infections

occur in Africa, yet only 18% of newborns in the continent are vaccinated against the virus, according to Vox.

Stigma toward and prejudice against people with hepatitis are often caused by ignorance about hepatitis and how it is transmitted. This can negatively impact people's personal and professional lives as well as their mental health. Stigma can also deter individuals from getting tested for hepatitis and seeking medical treatment when needed and can restrict work, study or travel opportunities.

Experts note that lack of knowledge about hepatitis can reduce the willingness of medical professionals and government officials to be proactive about controlling the disease.

"If a family is known to have hepatitis B, in many areas of the world, they really are shunned," Chari Cohen, MPH, DrPH, president of the Hepatitis B Foundation, told Vox. "I wouldn't want to be tested if I lived in a country and I knew that if I tested positive, I was going to lose my job."

Indeed, a recent study found that nearly half of Europeans living with HBV or HCV struggle to share their diagnosis with others due to stigma. Four out of 10 people with HCV and one in six people with HBV said they avoided seeking health care services despite needing them for fear of discrimination and stigma.

Cohen emphasizes the need for the global hepatitis community to mobilize and call for government action to meet hepatitis elimination goals.

"I kind of felt that after 25 years, I wouldn't have to constantly argue about prioritizing. I figured it would be a no-brainer," Cohen said. "But the communities that are most impacted by hepatitis B are the disenfranchised communities, the communities that don't typically have a political voice. They don't have political strength. And when you don't demand action, you don't get it."

To read more, click #Viral Hepatitis. There, you'll find headlines such as "New Report Flags Major Increase in STIs, Amidst Challenges in HIV and Hepatitis," "Gilead Announced $4M Grant for Viral Hepatitis Elimination" and "Hepatitis Surveillance Systems Lack Funding."

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