

Kabul 28 July 2014 – Today the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners observe World Hepatitis Day to increase awareness and understanding of viral hepatitis, its modes of transmission and the diseases that it causes. Viral hepatitis – a group of infectious diseases known as hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E – affects millions of people worldwide, causing acute and chronic liver disease and killing close to 1.4 million people every year.

“Viral hepatitis is a major public health problem that has for too long remained unknown or ignored,” says Dr Rik Peepkorn, WHO Representative in Afghanistan. This year, World Hepatitis Day is celebrated under the slogan of “Care for your liver: think about hepatitis”.

In Afghanistan close to 30 000 cases of viral hepatitis were diagnosed in 2013. Viral hepatitis is one of the most common and serious infections in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Every year, around 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B virus and 800 000 with hepatitis C virus. By the age of 15, half the children in the Region will have been exposed to hepatitis A.

The viruses are transmitted through different routes: hepatitis A and E through contaminated food and water; hepatitis B through blood and other bodily fluids, and hepatitis C mostly through blood. Hepatitis D is an additional infection in the presence of Hepatitis B. These viruses all cause acute hepatitis which is characterized by fatigue, loss of appetite, fever and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). Hepatitis infection can be prevented by providing safe food and water (hepatitis A and E), vaccines (hepatitis A, B, and E), screening of blood donations and provision of sterile injecting equipment and assuring infection control (hepatitis B and C).

“WHO is committed to supporting the Government of Afghanistan to rise to the challenge and fight this silent killer. There is a need to further strengthen access to treatment, raise public awareness, widen vaccination coverage and improve the prevention, screening and control of viral hepatitis and its related diseases,” says WHO Representative Peepkorn.

WHO Afghanistan has provided technical and financial support for the introduction of hepatitis B vaccine in a combined form of pentavalent (DPT-Hep B\_ Hib) in 2009 and hepatitis B birth dose in January 2014. These vaccines are for public use through national immunization programmes.

Globally, WHO has been intensifying its efforts to support countries in addressing viral hepatitis. In May this year, World Health Assembly delegates from 194 governments adopted a resolution to improve the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of viral hepatitis. The Global Hepatitis Programme was established in 2011 and a global strategy for the prevention and control of viral hepatitis was developed in 2012. WHO provides normative guidance for the management of hepatitis and also advocates for reduction in the price of treatment to make the necessary medicines more accessible to people in low-income countries.

**Related link**

[World Hepatitis Alliance](#)

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