



Cairo, 23 July, 2015 – The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean will host an event to observe World Hepatitis Day on 28 July 2015 in Cairo, Egypt. The regional theme of this year’s day is “Prevent hepatitis B and C”. It aims to generate both political and public awareness and action around the need to prevent hepatitis B and C.

Viral hepatitis is a global health problem affecting hundreds of millions of people worldwide. An estimated 1.45 million people die annually from all types of viral hepatitis, mostly from liver disease and cancer caused by these infections. Every day, thousands of people are newly infected because they lack access to information and services for prevention and treatment. Many of these people are unaware of their infection until diagnosed and have the potential to transmit the viruses to others. This year, WHO and its partners are urging policy-makers, health workers and the public to take action to prevent infection and death from hepatitis.

The Eastern Mediterranean Region has some of the highest rates of hepatitis in the world. Around 17 million people suffer from chronic hepatitis C. Every year, an estimated 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B and 800 000 people with hepatitis C.

The prevalence of viral hepatitis C in adults varies in the Region with Islamic Republic of Iran at 0.5%, Iraq at 3.2%, and Saudi Arabia at 1.5%. Two countries with the highest burden of hepatitis C are Pakistan (6.7%) and Egypt (7%), and the prevalence is higher among people who inject drugs.

Egypt was chosen to host World Hepatitis Day 2015 as the country has demonstrated a high level of commitment by tackling hepatitis comprehensively in their plan of action for prevention, care and treatment 2014–2018.

The Ministry of Health has set up 32 specialized centres and introduced a new hepatitis C drug last year, which is the first highly-effective and approved direct-acting antiviral drug for the nationwide treatment of hepatitis C infection. This medication is safer than previous medications and has been shown to cure more than 90% of those completing treatment, in combination with other drugs. In a global first, the drug has been made available to Egyptian patients for US\$ 900, which is 1% of its international price. So far, 128 000 people have started the new treatment.

“Viral hepatitis has long been neglected; yet hepatitis B and C are preventable, hepatitis B is manageable and hepatitis C is curable. People are unnecessarily suffering and we are unnecessarily losing lives. This suffering and loss of life should stop,” said WHO Regional Director Dr Ala Alwan.

In order to strengthen the prevention of hepatitis C, WHO has supported Egypt in the development of its national blood safety standards. It has also selected Egypt as one of the three pilot countries for the new Global Injection Safety Initiative that aims to reduce unnecessary injections and facilitate transition to the exclusive use of disposable syringes. During the celebration of World Hepatitis Day at the WHO Regional Office in Cairo, this initiative will be launched.

For the first time, WHO is developing a global health sector strategy for hepatitis. This strategy will increase political commitment and set the framework for concerted global action to eliminate viral hepatitis by 2030.

“We urge countries to make the most of the new opportunities and rising global momentum to develop and implement a strong hepatitis response. WHO remains committed to supporting countries reach the ambitious prevention and treatment targets of the global strategy that are also enshrined in universal coverage”, said Dr Ala Alwan.

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