

Cairo, 25 July 2012. On Saturday, 28 July, the second World Hepatitis Day will be observed across the world with new information highlighting the seriousness of this disease and its widespread distribution regionally and globally.

Research and studies undertaken by the world Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with its Member States and other partners show that hepatitis can be acute or chronic and may result in serious complications and even death. Viral hepatitis affects 1 in every 12 people worldwide. It affects those close to them too. Around 500 million people worldwide are chronically infected with two types of blood-borne hepatitis: hepatitis B and C. Approximately 1 million people die each year from related complications, most commonly from liver diseases including liver cancer.

All types of viral hepatitis occur throughout the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Some countries in the Region have higher infection rates for hepatitis C and hepatitis E than any other country in the world. In this Region approximately 17 million people are living today with hepatitis C infection, and approximately 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B infection every year.

In light of the alarming figures worldwide, in 2010 Ministers of Health at the World Health Assembly decided to designate 28 July every year as World Hepatitis Day, thus creating an opportunity to raise public awareness about viral hepatitis and focus attention on what can be done for its prevention and control.

This year, the slogan of World Hepatitis Day is “Hepatitis, it’s closer than you think. Know it. Confront it’. The key message of this day is that hepatitis is a preventable disease. Everyone can get this disease, yet it rarely affects those who consciously guard against it. It is important for people to be aware of this serious disease, how it is transmitted and how they can protect themselves.

Some of the essential information that everyone should know about the disease is that hepatitis is caused by a group of viruses that infect the liver through either consumption of contaminated food and water or exposure to unsafe blood and infected body fluids. Everyone has a role to confront hepatitis. At the community and individual level, certain behavioural practices increase the risk of these infections substantially, for example reuse of razor blades and injection syringes by traditional healers and tattooists and harmful behaviours such as sharing needles

and drug abuse. Provision of safe food and water would greatly prevent two types of viral hepatitis, hepatitis A and hepatitis E. Within health facilities, screening of blood and blood products, safe injection practices and clean dental work can significantly reduce the risk of infection from hepatitis B and C.

On the occasion of the world hepatitis Day, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, is urging all policy- and decision-makers, civil society, health professionals and public health communities in the Region to combine efforts to confront and combat this silent epidemic. “This is a defining moment for all of us. We have the tools today to make the difference. Let us work together to make it happen. Together, we can achieve more” he reiterated.

In this context he stressed that the chronic nature of hepatitis B and C infection calls for strong focus on screening, care and treatment. With early detection and appropriate management, it is possible to change the quality of life of millions of people who are living with this disease.

“The good news is that there is an effective vaccine for preventing hepatitis B. As of 2011, 17 out of 23 countries in the Region have included the hepatitis B vaccine in their immunization programmes. Over 80% of infants in these countries have received 3 doses of the vaccine, which will provide them with lifelong protection from hepatitis B infection. We are working with the remaining countries in the Region to help protect their people in the near future,” said Dr Alwan.

WHO is also working closely with countries to ensure the safety and quality of blood and blood products, their availability, equitable access and effective use to meet the needs of all people requiring blood transfusion, as the most effective approach to prevent hepatitis B and C.

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