Cairo, 25 July 2013 - Hepatitis viruses A, B, C, D and E can cause acute and chronic infection and inflammation of the liver that can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer.

World Hepatitis Day will be celebrated globally on 28 July 2013 under the slogan of: "This is hepatitis. Know it. Confront it". The campaign emphasizes the fact that hepatitis remains largely unknown or ignored as a public health threat in much of the world.

Viral hepatitis is a group of infectious diseases causing inflammation of the liver. There are five main types of hepatitis virus -A, B, C, D and E - which affect hundreds of millions of people worldwide. This year, World Hepatitis Day focuses on raising awareness of these different forms of hepatitis, how they are transmitted, who is at risk and the various methods of prevention and treatment.

Approximately 1 million people die each year from hepatitis-related complications, most commonly from liver diseases, including liver cancer. Current estimates indicate that viral hepatitis is the 8th leading cause of death worldwide causing close to 1 million deaths every year, on a par with deaths caused by HIV/AIDS or diarrhoeal diseases, and more than the number caused by tuberculosis and malaria. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), approximately 17 million people are living with hepatitis C virus infection and approximately 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B virus every year.

All types of viral hepatitis occur throughout the Region. Some countries in the Region have higher infection rates for hepatitis C and hepatitis E than any other country in the world.

The prevalence rate of chronic viral hepatitis (hepatitis B and C virus infection) in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is one of the highest in the world ranging from 2 to 10%. Civil unrest and conflict have undermined the health systems in many countries in the region.

The region has seen many explosive outbreaks of hepatitis E and A in countries with large number of internally displaced populations and refugees with inadequate sanitation.

The 2013 campaign aims to promote a coordinated global response to hepatitis targeting adults and young people, government, policy-makers and a range of civil society groups.

Hepatitis is a preventable disease. Effective vaccines are available that can provide life-long protection from hepatitis B infection. The chronic nature of hepatitis B and C calls for a strong focus on screening, care and treatment. However, many countries do not collect or report data on hepatitis and most people who were infected long ago with hepatitis B or C are unaware of their chronic infection. They are at high risk of developing severe chronic liver disease and can unknowingly transmit the infection to other people. For these reasons, it is often referred to as "the silent epidemic".

With the efforts of governments to enhance early detection and appropriate management and provide safe food and water the quality of life of millions of people living with this disease can be improved.

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.

At the community and individual level, certain harmful behavioural practices, such as reusing razor blades and injection syringes, practising unsafe sex, tattooing and sharing needles by injecting drug users all substantially increase the risk of infections with hepatitis B and C virus. Viral hepatitis caused by hepatitis A and E viruses is typically caused by ingestion of contaminated food and water.

World Hepatitis Day is an opportunity to focus attention on what can be done to prevent and control viral hepatitis. The World Health Organization urges all the governments, civil society, NGOs, academia, patient groups, and health professionals need to join hands and combine efforts to confront and combat this silent epidemic.

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