10 January 2017 – A survey of more than 20 000 people in Syria has found a concerning number of people infected with hepatitis C, especially among people who are at higher risk. Cases of hepatitis B infection, however, are decreasing as a result of an effective national vaccination campaign.

The study, carried out by the World Health Organization, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health, revealed that 14.4% of kidney dialysis patients included in the survey tested positive for hepatitis C. However, there was a low rate of infection among blood donors, of whom only 0.4% tested positive.

Among the 21 858 people surveyed across 11 governorates, the highest number of cases of hepatitis B infection were found among older people (individuals 60 years or more), of whom 3.1% tested positive. Schoolchildren had the lowest rate of hepatitis B infection. Syria introduced the hepatitis B vaccine in 1993 and the decreasing trend of hepatitis B infection among the young populations can be largely attributed to the vaccination programme.

There are several medications available to treat chronic hepatitis C, including new treatments that are more effective and have fewer side-effects than previous options. The new treatments, however, are expensive and in many cases, unaffordable.

There is no cure for hepatitis B infection, but chronic infection can be treated with drugs that can slow the progression of the disease and improve long-term survival. The hepatitis B vaccine, however, is the mainstay of prevention and is recommended to all infants as soon as possible after birth, followed by 2 or 3 subsequent doses.

In the Middle East, an estimated 2–3% of the general population is chronically infected with hepatitis B. Egypt and Pakistan are among the countries with the highest burdens of hepatitis C in the world.

Based on the findings of the survey, WHO is working together with the Ministry of Health to develop an effective strategy to control viral hepatitis in the country with special focus on the infection control activities.
Related links

Factsheet on hepatitis B

Factsheet on hepatitis C

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