



Regional Office for South-East Asia

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Viral hepatitis kills more than any other communicable disease in South-East Asia

New Delhi, 28 July 2011: Viral hepatitis kills more people than any other communicable disease in WHO's South-East Asia Region, but few realize how lethal the disease is. On the first World Hepatitis Day, 28 July 2011, WHO is urging countries to make viral hepatitis a national health priority.

"Viral hepatitis is a silent killer in South-East Asia. An infected person may show no symptoms and appear healthy for years before succumbing to complications of the disease," said Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO's Regional Director for South-East Asia. "It strikes people in their most productive years, resulting in a huge economic burden for the family, as well as the country" he added.

Four viruses commonly cause the largest number of hepatitis infections: hepatitis A, B, C and E. The estimated number of deaths in the Region associated with viral hepatitis and its complications exceeds deaths due to malaria, dengue and HIV/AIDS combined. Every year, an estimated 8.98 million cases of hepatitis, and 585 800 deaths occur in the Region. Of these, 400 000 cases and 800 deaths are due to hepatitis A; 1 380 000 cases and 300 000 deaths due to hepatitis B; 500 000 cases and 120 000 deaths due to hepatitis C and 6 500 000 cases with 160 000 deaths and 2700 stillbirths due to hepatitis E.

Unsanitary conditions, infected blood and unprotected sex are some of the ways by which this disease spreads. While hepatitis A and E are transmitted through contaminated food and water, hepatitis B and C are transmitted through infected blood or bodily fluids, among other means.

Spread by contaminated food and water, lack of good personal hygiene such as regular handwashing with clean water, hepatitis A and E infection are of major concern in WHO's South-East Asia Region. The Region bears more than half the global burden of hepatitis E infection. Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable. In approximately a quarter of all such cases, the infection results in death, and stillbirths.

While a vaccine for hepatitis A exists, there is no vaccine yet for hepatitis E. The best preventive measures are maintaining good personal hygiene and consuming freshly-cooked food and boiled water.

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Hepatitis B and C are also major public health problems in the Region. It is estimated that 100 million people with chronic hepatitis B infection (5.6% of the population) and 30 million people with chronic hepatitis C infection (1.6% of the population) live in the Region. The hepatitis B virus is 50-100 times more infectious than HIV. Hepatitis C infection is a serious occupational hazard for health workers.

Due to the asymptomatic nature of hepatitis B and C, about 60% of infected individuals are unaware of their diagnosis until they suffer complications such as cirrhosis or a type of liver cancer called hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Cirrhosis and HCC are not reversible, and lead to death. Further compounding the problem of undiagnosed hepatitis B and C infection is the generally low level of knowledge about these infections among health-care workers. Many providers do not comply with WHO and national guidelines or recommendations for hepatitis B and C prevention, screening, treatment and follow-up services. Yet, while an effective vaccine is available for hepatitis B, there is no vaccine or effective cure for hepatitis C.

To prevent and control viral hepatitis, WHO is urging countries to make control of viral hepatitis a national priority. Increasing infant immunization coverage for hepatitis B to reach 95% coverage, mandatory testing and screening of all blood and blood products for hepatitis B and C and monitoring the quality of hepatitis testing in public and private laboratories are also recommended. Countries must provide continuing education on hepatitis, including risk factors and recommendations for vaccination, prevention and proper monitoring of infected persons to communities, health professionals and social service workers. Core surveillance for hepatitis A, B, C and E must be strengthened along with treatment facilities for chronic hepatitis B and C. On World Hepatitis Day, WHO is also recommending that hepatitis be made a notifiable disease.

For more information please contact:

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More information on hepatitis, including factsheets and a quiz, are available at www.searo.who.int/cds