

UN agency launches action plan against 'hidden' hepatitis

July 25 2012

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced on Wednesday measures to fight the "hidden epidemic" of hepatitis which kills more than one million people a year.

The virus, which settles in the liver causing inflammation, affects 500 million people worldwide but can go unnoticed for years and even decades, the UN health agency told reporters in Geneva.

"The vast majority of people infected with hepatitis are unaware, undiagnosed and untreated," says Dr Sylvie Briand of WHO's Pandemic and [Epidemic Disease](#) Department.

"Only by increasing awareness of the different forms of hepatitis, and how they can be prevented and treated, can we take the first step towards full control of the disease and save thousands of lives," she added.

One in 12 people are infected by the virus which exists in five forms: A, B, C, D and E.

The WHO is particularly keen to target types B and C since "a high proportion" of people only become aware of their infection when they are chronically ill.

"This can sometimes be decades after infection," said Briand.

Launched ahead of World Hepatitis Day on July 28, the WHO's multi-

pronged action plan to eradicate the virus calls on governments to raise awareness, transform research into policy and action, and prevent transmission by effective screening, care and treatment.

"It's a framework for global action so we all collaborate to fight the hidden epidemic", said Briand.

Individuals can protect themselves by washing their hands, food safety practices, practising [safe sex](#) and avoiding [injecting drugs](#) with infected needles, "one of the most common ways of getting infected in some countries", said Briand.

The virus was only discovered in 1989 but vaccines are available for all virus types except C.

A new generation of anti-viral treatments is also on offer for [hepatitis C](#), said Briand, adding that other treatments to stop the B type developing into [cirrhosis](#) and cancer are also coming online.

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Citation: UN agency launches action plan against 'hidden' hepatitis (2012, July 25) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-agency-action-hidden-hepatitis.html>

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