

NGO sounds alarm on rising hepatitis deaths in Asia

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A Singapore-based group fighting the spread of viral hepatitis called for greater political will to combat the disease Friday, as new data showed it killed one person every 30 seconds in Asia.

Ding-Shinn Chen, chair of NGO the Coalition to Eradicate Viral Hepatitis in Asia Pacific (CEVHAP), said the latest figures show that one million people die from the illness in the region annually, up from 695,000 in 1990.

This translates to one person dying every 30 seconds from hepatitis, according to the figures, derived from the latest Global Burden of Disease Study led by the University of Washington.

The results were released publicly in June.

The Asia-Pacific death rate from hepatitis—which settles in the liver causing inflammation—is three times that of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Chen said.

It is "symptomatic of the poor understanding and lack of political commitment that has typically surrounded these diseases in many countries," Chen said in a statement released in Singapore ahead of World Hepatitis Day on Sunday.

"A comprehensive effort from governments is urgently needed if we are to curb the shocking death toll and prevent millions of new infections."

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), viral hepatitis kills close to 1.4 million globally, and affects hundreds of millions of others.

The disease was only discovered in 1989, and exists in five forms: A, B, C, D and E.

Vaccines are available for all forms except C, which morphs into stronger variants when under attack by the immune system.

The body is unable to produce enough "neutralising antibodies", the only kind able to handling a broad array of mutations.

Stephen Locarnini, an [infectious diseases](#) researcher and joint secretary of CEVHAP, said vaccines as well as new treatment methods for Hepatitis C could save thousands of lives, "but none of these matter if governments fail to tackle [viral hepatitis](#) in a more comprehensive way".

He said [health authorities](#) in the Asia-Pacific region should deal with [hepatitis](#) in the same concerted manner with which they approach AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

"This starts with the development of a national action plan and our expert members are ready and willing to help governments in the development of these, following the blueprint provided by WHO."

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