

Experts call for stepped-up hepatitis battle

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The world can beat the cancer-causing disease hepatitis if it raises its game, but treatment programmes need to go hand in hand with those tackling the likes of HIV, experts said Thursday.

Viral hepatitis is a group of infectious diseases known by the letters A, B, C, D or E, which attack the liver.

Despite killing close to 1.4 million people every year—with Asia the hardest-hit region—hepatitis has long failed to grab the spotlight.

Ninety percent of deaths are from hepatitis B and C, responsible for two-thirds of the global liver cancer toll.

"It's a no-brainer. The best way to prevent liver cancer or people dying from [liver cirrhosis](#) is to prevent and treat [viral hepatitis](#)," said Samuel So, a liver surgeon and professor at Stanford University in California.

"If you do that, you'll save a lot of lives and a lot of healthcare costs," he told reporters in Geneva.

Hepatitis B and C are transmitted from infected mothers to newborn babies, by unsafe injections during medical procedures and drug use, or unsafe sex.

"Finally we're seeing some real momentum building," said Stefan Wiktor, leader of the hepatitis programme at the World Health Organization.

Testing is crucial, given that of the estimated 500 million people with viral hepatitis, many are unaware of their infection.

"We also need to make sure there is prevention in place, that healthcare-associated transmission is reduced, that injecting drug users to the equipment they need to prevent from getting infected," Wiktor told reporters.

Hepatitis C, notably, is undergoing a "therapeutic revolution", Wiktor said, with new medicines offering a cure rate of 95 percent.

"That totally changes the dynamic about how we should approach this," he added.

Hepatitis kills almost as many people a year as HIV/AIDS, and therefore needs a similar degree of international traction, said So.

People affected by HIV are also particularly vulnerable to hepatitis, with up to 10 million worldwide estimated to be infected with both.

Advances in HIV treatment have prolonged the lives of people with that virus, meaning they have more time to develop hepatitis-related [liver cancer](#), but hepatitis treatment still lags behind.

"The structure we created for HIV treatment is ideal for hepatitis treatment. It's time that we didn't put these diseases into silos," So said.

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