

WHO urges stepped-up battle against hepatitis B

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The world can beat the liver-attacking hepatitis B virus, which results in some 650.000 deaths a year, the World Health Organization said Thursday, releasing its first treatment guidelines for the disease.

"Viral hepatitis is certainly an epidemic, a pandemic, but it is one that remains silent," said Gottfried Hirnschall, head of WHO's HIV/AIDS department.

But if countries ensure that all children and risk groups are vaccinated and that those already infected receive appropriate [treatment](#), the world could eliminate the disease "within 10 to 20 years", he told reporters in Geneva.

The UN health agency has long urged the vaccination of all newborns against the devastating virus, which can transmit from infected mothers.

Hepatitis B can also transmit through unsafe injections during medical procedures and drug use, or unsafe sex, but once a child is vaccinated, more than 90 percent are protected from the virus for life.

But while some 80 percent of children worldwide now receive vaccines, dramatically shrinking [infection rates](#), some 240 million people around the world are still living with [chronic hepatitis B](#).

They will all eventually need treatment and a full third of them will to develop fatal cirrhosis and [liver cancer](#), Hirnschall said.

Africa hard-hit

The highest infection rates are in Africa and Asia, with a full eight percent of people in the hardest-hit west African countries living with the chronic form of the virus, compared to around two percent in Europe and North America.

Vaccination, and especially giving a vital birth dose within the first 24 hours of life, has proven highly effective in places like China, which has slashed infection rates from eight to below one percent over the past two decades, said Stefan Wiktor, head of WHO's Global Hepatitis Programme.

Worldwide, only about 50 percent of babies are getting the birth dose, with the lowest rates in Africa, where health systems are weaker and more women give birth at home.

"We need to scale up the delivery of the birth dose," he told reporters, pointing out that the vaccine costs just \$0.20 per person.

WHO's new [treatment guidelines](#) meanwhile aim to help countries, especially in the harder-hit developing world, care for people living with chronic hepatitis B and prevent them from developing cirrhosis and liver cancer.

The guidelines among other things call for simple tests to assess the stage of liver disease in hepatitis B patients to identify who needs treatment, and regular monitoring to help detect liver cancer.

They also urge the use of two "safe and highly effective" drugs, tenofovir or entecavir, to treat chronic hepatitis B.

The drugs are widely available in cheaper generic forms and can cost as

little as \$5.00 a month, WHO said.

"Because for so many people treatment is life-long, it is important that patients can access these medicines at the lowest possible price," Wiktor said.

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