



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

on the occasion of the

WORLD HEPATITIS DAY

28 July 2012

Hepatitis is a disease of the liver. A group of viruses may infect the body through either consumption of contaminated food and water or exposure to unsafe blood and infected body fluids.

Hepatitis can be acute or chronic and may result in serious complications and even death. Viral hepatitis affects 1 in every 12 people worldwide. It affects those close to them too. Around 500 million people worldwide are chronically infected with two types of blood borne hepatitis: hepatitis B and C. Approximately 1 million people die each year from related complications, most commonly from liver diseases including liver cancer.

On 28 July every year, World Hepatitis Day is observed across the world. This day, which was designated by Ministers of Health at the World Health Assembly in 2010, is an opportunity to raise public awareness about viral hepatitis and focus attention on what we can do for its prevention and control.

All types of viral hepatitis occur throughout the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Some countries in the Region have higher infection rates for hepatitis C and hepatitis E than any other country in the world. In our Region, approximately 17 million people are living today with hepatitis C infection and approximately 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B infection every year.

The World Health Organization has accumulated good evidence on modes of transmission of hepatitis and efficient means of its prevention and control. Provision of safe food and water would greatly prevent two types of viral hepatitis, hepatitis A and hepatitis E. Within health facilities, screening of blood and blood products, safe injection practices and clean dental work can significantly reduce the risk of infection from hepatitis B and C. At the community and individual level, certain behavioural practices increase the risk of these infections substantially, for example reuse of razor blades and injection syringes by traditional healers and tattooists and harmful behaviours such as sharing needles and drug abuse.

The good news is that there is an effective vaccine for preventing hepatitis B. As of 2011, 17 out of 23 countries in the Region have included the hepatitis B vaccine in their immunization programmes. Over 80% of infants in these countries have received 3 doses of the vaccine, which will provide them with lifelong protection from hepatitis B infection. We are working with the remaining countries in the Region to help protect their people in the near future.

WHO is also working closely with countries to ensure the safety and quality of blood and blood products, their availability, equitable access and effective use to meet the needs of all requiring blood transfusion. The chronic nature of the hepatitis B and C infection calls for strong focus on screening, care and treatment. With early detection and appropriate management, we can change the quality of life of millions of people who are living with this disease.

On a happier note, I would like to say that viral hepatitis is receiving far more recognition and attention than at any time before, with many communities across the globe observing World Hepatitis Day for the first time last year. Awareness is key. This is why this year, the slogan of World Hepatitis Day is “Hepatitis, it’s closer than you think. Know it. Confront it”.

This is a defining moment for all of us. I urge today all our policy- and decision-makers, civil society, charitable and non-profit organizations, academia, patient groups, health professionals and public health communities in our region to combine efforts to confront and combat this silent epidemic.

Hepatitis is a preventable disease. Every one of us can get this disease, yet it rarely affects those who consciously guard against it. Let us be aware of this serious disease, how it is transmitted and how we can protect ourselves.

We have the tools today to make the difference. Let us work together to make it happen. Together, we can achieve more.