



Message from
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on the occasion of
World Hepatitis Day
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**Test for
hepatitis B and C.
It could save your
life.**

World Hepatitis Day has become an important annual occasion. It reminds us of our global commitment to combat viral hepatitis as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The WHO Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis elaborates on Sustainable Development Goal 3 and calls for the elimination of viral hepatitis by 2030. Moving towards this goal will require concerted efforts. The key step to achieve elimination is to find those people who are undiagnosed and link them to care and treatment, and so the global strategy calls for a major increase in the diagnosis of chronic viral B and C hepatitis infection.

Viral hepatitis remains a considerable public health threat in the Eastern Mediterranean, with almost 36 million people chronically infected with either hepatitis B or C (15 million with hepatitis C and 21 million with hepatitis B). Our Region has the highest hepatitis C prevalence in the world, at 2.3%, and is the third worst-affected region for hepatitis B, at 3.3%.

Yet notwithstanding the huge burden of the disease in our Region, countries have made significant progress in combating viral hepatitis. Egypt is setting a good example in moving towards elimination by scaling up its testing activities, finding millions of hepatitis C patients and providing them with treatment. Pakistan has developed its national strategy and successfully secured very low drug prices for hepatitis C treatment. Other countries, such as Morocco, are also investing in strengthening their hepatitis programmes; Morocco has announced a plan to eliminate hepatitis C by 2030.

The Region has also made great progress towards achieving the regional hepatitis B reduction goal. Average coverage with the third dose of hepatitis B vaccine in the Region exceeded 80% in 2017, and 14 countries have achieved the target of 90% coverage. Additionally, 17 countries in our Region are successfully implementing the hepatitis B birth dose. Available data indicate that many countries are on track to achieve the regional hepatitis B reduction goal.

Despite this commendable work by Member States, we still face many obstacles and challenges. Only one in four people infected with hepatitis C and one in 50 infected with hepatitis B are aware of their infection, preventing them from accessing life-saving treatment. Several countries in the Region do not have testing policies in place. In addition to poor infection control practices and limited awareness of the disease, a lack of easily accessible testing services in most countries remains a key challenge that hinders our ability to prevent and control viral hepatitis.

Without tackling the huge gap in diagnosis, people living with viral hepatitis will not get the chance to seek treatment and live healthier lives. Untreated chronic infection may lead to liver disease, cirrhosis and liver cancer. Current technological advances have improved access to hepatitis testing and made it easier than before. By knowing their status, people can make better choices, live healthier lives and become part of the drive to prevent the disease.

Today, we have a golden opportunity to eliminate viral hepatitis. Governments, civil society, the private sector and academia all have a duty to develop multisectoral strategies and set targets for preventing, diagnosing and treating viral hepatitis.

Hepatitis testing is a lifesaver. I call upon all policy-makers to make hepatitis testing available, and I call upon people to discuss their hepatitis risk with their healthcare providers and get tested accordingly.