



Message from
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**Hepatitis-free
future**

on the occasion of
World Hepatitis Day
28 July 2020

Today is World Hepatitis Day. Marking this event amid the unprecedented pandemic that is currently sweeping the globe demonstrates our commitment to continuity of services. COVID-19 has affected immunization, prevention, diagnosis and treatment of many diseases, including hepatitis. So today is an opportunity for all WHO Member States to restate their commitment to the people we serve.

Our Region has witnessed major achievements in hepatitis response in recent years, thanks to strong political commitment in several countries, and we at WHO also remain committed to eliminating hepatitis. This year's World Hepatitis Day campaign focuses on the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B (HBV PMTCT) to ensure a hepatitis-B-free future for the next generation. Most of the disease burden related to hepatitis B results from infections acquired early in life through perinatal or early childhood exposure to HBV. We can secure PMTCT with three doses of hepatitis B vaccine starting at birth plus other interventions, including testing pregnant women with a view to prophylaxis.

There are significant differences among the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region when it comes to hepatitis B immunization. As at the end of 2019, only one in three newborns in the Region were receiving a hepatitis B birth dose on time. Some countries achieve high coverage of hepatitis B vaccination for the third dose, but 10 countries, including those with a high disease burden, do not offer a birth dose of hepatitis B vaccine or have less than 50% coverage. Testing pregnant women for hepatitis B is a new concept in the Region. Diagnosing pregnant women chronically infected with HBV provides an opportunity to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus to their babies through PMTCT. Some countries in our Region could be ready to introduce testing of pregnant women, and we are asking all our countries to examine their situation and look for opportunities to take further steps towards elimination. This will get us closer to our goal of being a Region where every child grows up free of hepatitis B.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have dominated our attention, but as we evolve towards a new normal and our societies reopen, we must not lose sight of our goals of achieving universal health coverage and our regional vision of Health for All by All. Reaching and maintaining high coverage of hepatitis B birth dose and third dose vaccination is imperative. In resolutions of WHO's regional and global governing bodies, our Member States pledged to control hepatitis B through immunization, and to eliminate viral hepatitis through testing and treatment. However, some have not yet attained the goal of hepatitis B control by 2020, and all countries need to work to achieve the goal set out in the Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis of eliminating viral hepatitis by 2030.

On World Hepatitis Day 2020, I seek renewed commitments. WHO will work hand in hand with national programmes to further strengthen our Member States' efforts, provide the support needed to achieve complete life-course vaccination for everyone, integrate service delivery arrangements, reach universal health coverage and eliminate hepatitis. There is a long road ahead, but each step takes us closer to a hepatitis-B-free future for our children.