



Message from

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the Eastern Mediterranean
on the occasion of
World Hepatitis Day
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Today, we mark World Hepatitis Day amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a chance to reflect on our Member States' commitment to ensuring the continuity of hepatitis services and reaching the elimination targets in the Global Health Sector Strategy and our regional vision of Health for All by All.

According to WHO estimates, in 2020 there were 30 million people chronically infected with viral hepatitis viruses in the Eastern Mediterranean Region; 65 000 people died of hepatitis and 570 000 became infected. COVID-19 made it even more difficult to deliver essential health services, including vaccination, diagnosis and care. But despite the challenges, and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, WHO's Thirteenth Programme of Work (GPW 13) and our vision for the Region, *Vision 2023*, we must not lose sight of our goal of universal health coverage. Successful elimination requires scaling up five key recommended interventions. We need to vaccinate infants against hepatitis B, prevent mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B virus, ensure blood and injection safety, reduce harm among people who inject drugs and implement testing with a view to treatment.

Our Region has led the way in hepatitis C testing and treatment over the last five years, thanks to strong political commitment from our Member States, especially Egypt. Twenty Member States have now achieved hepatitis B control targets, reaching less than 1% hepatitis B prevalence among children under five years of age. These successes prove that we can make a difference.

Unfortunately, however, people in our Region are still getting infected with hepatitis viruses in health care settings – precisely where they should expect to be safe. Unsafe injection continues to be a driving source of hepatitis B and C virus infections and other blood-borne diseases such as HIV. Coverage of hepatitis B birth dose vaccination – a key intervention to prevent mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B virus – remains far too low. Such coverage hinders our efforts to achieve a hepatitis-free future for coming generations.

On World Hepatitis Day last year, I urged ministers of health to renew their commitment to eliminating viral hepatitis, and I called for a concerted effort among relevant programmes towards the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HBV. Today, the necessary evidence and tools are available. Hepatitis, HIV/STI, maternal and neonatal health and vaccination programmes from our Member States did come together and identified the ways and mechanisms to move forward with the elimination of mother-to-child transmission. I am pleased to say that today, several Member States will be announcing their roadmaps to accelerate progress in this area.

I hope that today will be the start of a steady journey towards the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HBV in our Region. Children who were just born cannot wait more than 24 hours to receive their first dose of hepatitis B vaccine. I take this opportunity to urge all our country programmes, civil society and their partners to work hand in hand and make sure that every mother is tested for hepatitis B, that every newborn is fully vaccinated, starting in the first 24 hours of life, and that we develop a people-centred approach to the continuity of care so that every mother diagnosed with hepatitis B can be assured of having their child protected from hepatitis B virus. This will bring us one step closer to eliminating viral hepatitis. And this is what we mean by Health for All by All.

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CAN'T
WAIT!**