

MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
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World Hepatitis Awareness Day: 28 July

Pretoria: South Africa joins the global community to raise awareness and increase awareness of viral hepatitis, a preventable and manageable disease which remains a silent and neglected cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide. Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver and is often caused by a virus. Viral hepatitis means there is a specific virus causing your liver to inflame (swell or become larger than normal).

World Hepatitis Day is observed each year on 28 July to educate the public about the disease and encourage individuals, health professionals, communities and governments to drive awareness and action to eliminate viral hepatitis.

Viral hepatitis is responsible for an enormous health burden, mostly due to chronic hepatitis B and C infection. According to the 2024 World Health Organization Global Hepatitis report, in 2022 an estimated 304 million people were living with Hepatitis B (254 m) and Hepatitis C (50m) globally. Viral hepatitis is the second leading infectious cause of death globally, with about 1.3 million deaths recorded annually around the world, including over 2000 deaths recorded in South Africa.

This burden is further compounded by the lack of screening, access to care and treatment, as well as inadequate disease surveillance, human and financial resources. People living with underlying conditions such as HIV are at a higher risk due to co-infection which further exacerbates the burden of liver disease.

South Africa is signatory to the World Health Organization's global hepatitis strategy endorsed by other Member States, which aims to reduce new hepatitis infections by 90% and deaths by 65% between 2016 and 2030.

There are 5 main hepatitis viruses, referred to as types A, B, C, D and E, which spread in different ways including contact with contaminated food or water (A & E), contact with blood or bodily fluids of an infected person (B), blood-to-blood contact (C) and contact with infected blood (D).

The prevention of this infectious disease includes both pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical interventions such as vaccine, practicing safer sex, good hygiene, avoid sharing needles, toothbrushes and razors. Avoid drinking water from known potentially unsafe source and cooking food well can prevent the spread of the disease.

Viral Hepatitis is typically asymptomatic. If symptomatic may include fever, malaise, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark-coloured urine and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes). In some cases, the virus can also cause a chronic liver infection or liver cancer, putting patients at a higher risk of death, unless they get treatment.

The Department of Health has developed National Guidelines for the Management of Viral Hepatitis as part of efforts to reduce morbidity and mortality in the country to inform healthcare workers in both public and private sectors about the disease, its epidemiology and the current methods of diagnosis and therapy to strengthen the response.

People, especially those experiencing any of the hepatitis symptoms are urged to go for screening and testing for early diagnosis and treatment depending on the type of hepatitis. Those at higher risk of serious health complications if they contract Hepatitis B and/or C need vaccine (Hep B) include all newborns and previously unvaccinated children and adolescents, persons with more than one sex partner, key populations (People who use/inject drugs/men who have sex with other men/sex workers), and individuals infected with HIV and/or other sexually transmitted diseases.

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