

NOhep: Elimination of viral hepatitis by 2030

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Less than two months ago, the Puerto Rico Medical Center identified an outbreak of hepatitis A [3] in which at least 26 hospital employees were affected. Despite the shock the news provoked, most readers were oblivious, and possibly still are, as to the nature of this particular virus (such as the fact that it is not transmitted by sheer proximity, or by sneezing, by example). There is a strong stigma and fear around the word "hepatitis", and not enough public education to contribute in preventing, diagnosing, and treating the disease. **World Hepatitis Day**, a global effort to eliminate viral hepatitis, began on July 28th. We want to be a part of it, and we will begin by discussing some important aspects about the disease.

- Hepatitis is the seventh (7th) killer worldwide ^[4], killing more people than HIV / AIDS, tuberculosis, or malaria.
- From 1990 to 2013, the number of deaths from infection, disease and liver cancer ^[5] (various manifestations of hepatitis), increased from 890,000 to 1,400,000.
- There are vaccines against Hepatitis A and B, and the CDC recommends that anyone traveling to Puerto Rico is vaccinated against these viruses. However, there is no vaccine against Hepatitis C, which causes long-term chronic illness in most infected and could eventually lead to liver cancer in some patients.
- Currently in Puerto Rico, children born in hospitals receive their first dose of the Hepatitis B vaccine within 24 hours of birth, because it is a disease that can be transmitted from mother to child during birth.

What is hepatitis?

Viral hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by a virus, or rather, 5 different types of viruses, each of which present differently. They are individually discussed at the end of the article.

Common symptoms of hepatitis

The most common symptoms of viral hepatitis are fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark colored urine, "pale" or light-colored feces, joint pain and yellowing of the skin and sclera (whites of the eyes).

Why should I care?

Hepatitis has been called "the silent killer" because, as one who is poisoned slowly, most of the victims don't know about their infection until it's too late. Symptoms do not present equally in all patients, and can sometimes even go unnoticed, or be mistaken for another viral illness. Those who don't realize they are infected are not treated on time, and do not always take the precautions necessary to limit spreading the disease further.

Certain types of hepatitis can become chronic, leading to liver dysfunction which can decrease the span and quality of life.

It is important to take preventive measures, such as being vaccinated, and have screening tests performed to detect infection in order to protect our health and that of others. We encourage you to talk to your doctor about hepatitis and these preventive measures.

"Make the elimination of viral hepatitis our next greatest achievement"

The campaign for World Hepatitis Day has been promoted with the theme of "ELIMINATION." For the first time, the World Health Organization (WHO) has proposed an ambitious strategy to eliminate viral hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. To promote the movement and create awareness, while forming links between all those who contribute to the effort, the World Hepatitis Alliance [6] has created a website that can be accessed here [7]. Worldwide, people have shared a great deal of educational materials in different languages, as well as a map of impact, among other resources.

The following video contains a wonderful explanation of the initiative and subtitles in 8 different languages.

We invite you to join the campaign by following this link [7], thus helping eliminate viral hepatitis as a threat to global health. Let's start with ourselves.

For those who want to know more [8]: **A, B, C, D and E?**

Hepatitis A [9]: is transmitted by the fecal-oral route, through contact with other people (for example if they have poor hygiene, or do not wash their hands after using the bathroom), or by consuming food (such as raw shellfish) or water that has been contaminated with the stool of an infected person. The most common symptom is a yellowing of the skin. The disease does not affect the same person twice, since the patient develops antibodies.

The CDC recommends that most travelers visiting PR get vaccinated against Hepatitis A and use good judgment when consuming food, because the virus is considered endemic in PR.

Hepatitis B [10]: Hepatitis B is transmitted from person to person through the exchange of bodily fluids (such as semen or blood), whether through sex, sharing needles, or from mother to child the time of delivery. The Hepatitis B virus presents acutely and in some cases, can then progress to chronic disease. This happens in only 4-6% of adults but more than 90% of infants and can lead to cirrhosis or liver cancer.

One of the greatest dangers of the virus is that a person infected with Hepatitis B often does not always know they are infected, and can spread the virus without knowing. For this reason it is recommended to minimize exposure to the virus by using condoms in all sexual interaction and avoiding sharing of syringes, toothbrushes (gums may bleed and mouth sores can be a route of infection), knives, and the like. In addition, you should avoid performing piercings or tattoos at home or in unlicensed facilities. Fortunately, we have access to the best prevention method available, vaccination against Hepatitis B.

Hepatitis C [11]: The most common way of contracting Hepatitis C is through the exchange of syringes and other instruments used for injecting drugs. Other methods of transmission are through blood transfusions in countries where donations are not routinely analyzed, as well as piercings or tattoos done with contaminated objects. More than 70% of people who contract the virus develop a chronic disease.

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine for Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis D [12]: The Hepatitis D virus is transmitted through body fluids, and needs the Hepatitis B virus to be present in order to cause infection. Thus, the Hepatitis B vaccine also protects against this virus.

Hepatitis E [13]: Hepatitis E is transmitted via the fecal-oral route and is associated with contaminated water. It has an acute presentation that the body itself limited, however, it has been become a severe illness and even progress to fulminant hepatitis (liver dysfunction), causing death in pregnant women.

Now that you know more about Hepatitis, we invite you once again to join the campaign [7] to eliminate viral hepatitis as a threat to global health. Let's start with ourselves, but let's not limit ourselves. Share this information to help save lives!

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