

WHO publishes first guidelines for hepatitis B treatment

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The World Health Organization (WHO) issued today its first hepatitis B treatment guidelines: ‘Guidelines for the prevention, care and treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis B infection’, laying out a simplified approach to the care and treatment of persons living with chronic hepatitis B infection [1].

These guidelines are intended for country programme managers to help plan the development and scale up of hepatitis B prevention, care and treatment and also for healthcare providers who care for persons infected with hepatitis B virus (HBV).

Key recommendations include:

- the use of simple non-invasive tests to assess the stage of liver disease;
- prioritising treatment for those with most advanced stage of liver disease;
- the use of safe and effective medicines for treatment;
- regular monitoring using simple tests for early detection of liver cancer, to assess whether treatment is working, and if treatment can be stopped.

The special needs of specific populations, such as people co-infected with HIV, children and adolescents, and pregnant women are also considered.

Existing recommendations for the prevention of HBV transmission from relevant WHO guidelines are also summarised in the newly published guidelines and include prevention of perinatal and early childhood HBV infection through infant hepatitis B vaccination; catch-up vaccination and other prevention strategies in key affected populations (people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men, sex workers) as well as prevention of transmission in healthcare settings.

Hepatitis B infection is caused by the HBV, an enveloped DNA virus that infects the liver, causing hepatocellular necrosis and inflammation. Chronic hepatitis B – defined as persistence of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) for six months or more – is a major public health problem.

References

1. World Health Organization (WHO). Guidelines for the prevention, care and treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis B infection. Geneva: WHO. Mar 2015. Available from: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/154590/1/9789241549059_eng.pdf?ua=1&ua=1