

NOhep calls for international donor support for hepatitis elimination.

Viral hepatitis is a neglected global health crisis. Hepatitis B and C affect 325 million people worldwide and claims 1.4 million lives annually. That equates to 2.5% of deaths globally each year.

The World Health Assembly has called on member states to eliminate viral hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030. Elimination is possible because we have the tools to prevent, diagnose, and treat viral hepatitis. We have effective vaccines and treatments for hepatitis B and a cure for hepatitis C; yet every day thousands of people are dying due to liver cancer, cirrhosis and other hepatitis-related illnesses.

The highest burden of disease occurs in low- and middle-income countries, disproportionately affecting the poorest and most marginalised people in the world. Without the support of development partners and donors, low- and middle-income countries are left to tackle this major health crisis alone, often without the domestic resources needed to achieve its elimination.

We must seize the opportunity to tackle the health crises of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis (TB), malaria and viral hepatitis together, especially in the context of co-infections. Many of the strategies and infrastructures required for hepatitis elimination can be effectively integrated with existing programmes. The molecular diagnostic systems used for TB, and HIV can be used to detect viral hepatitis. The same generic drug (Tenofovir) is used to treat HIV and hepatitis B. Hepatitis C medications are available at low cost, are simple to administer and can cure virtually all people of their hepatitis C infection. With a small additional cost, substantial gains can be achieved for public health and the health of communities impacted by HIV, TB and malaria.

UNITAID has been a leader in supporting work around co-infections and we strongly support expansion of similar initiatives. Among the 36.7 million persons living with HIV in 2015, an estimated 2.7 million also had hepatitis B and 2.3 million had hepatitis C. Aligning the hepatitis response with other global health strategies will allow us to achieve a more efficient, sustainable, and impactful response to all of these diseases.

And if nothing is done to combat viral hepatitis, by 2040 it will claim more lives than HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria combined.

As countries move towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC) they must explore areas of integration to achieve UHC and work toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The combining of viral hepatitis elimination with the HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria response can be a leading example of how a cohesive, integrated approach can be taken to better utilise health resources and move toward achieving both UHC and SDG targets.

We urge the Global Fund to prioritise and proactively support the integration of viral hepatitis within existing HIV, TB and malaria programmes and respectfully call on all development partners and donors to join the fight for viral hepatitis elimination. By working together we will achieve hepatitis elimination and avert over 7 million deaths by 2030.

The Global Fund replenishment campaign 'Step up the Fight' is asking people to make a pledge to the 7-year-olds of today, promising the elimination of HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria by the time they turn 18. With your support, we can offer them a world free of hepatitis as well.

We are the first generation that can eliminate this global killer. Let's not be the first generation that didn't take up the fight.

Sincerely,
Prevent Cancer Foundation