

BACKGROUND MEDIA INFORMATION

Viral hepatitis: A significant threat to health in Europe

Viral hepatitis is inflammation of the liver caused by a viral infection. There are five main types of hepatitis virus, known as Hepatitis A, B, C, D and E. While Hepatitis A and E are usually contracted by consuming food or water contaminated with the virus, Hepatitis B, C and D are transmitted through contact with infected blood or other bodily fluids.¹ Hepatitis B and C can also be transmitted through sexual contact or passed from mother to child.¹

Although the five hepatitis viruses and their impact on the human body differ, all can pose a threat to the health of the liver.

Viral hepatitis kills 1.4 million people worldwide each year.¹

Viral hepatitis is the most common cause of primary liver cancer, and many of the deaths caused by viral hepatitis are the result of liver cancer.²

Focus on Hepatitis C

Background on Hepatitis C

The Hepatitis C virus was first isolated and discovered in 1989.³ By the 25th anniversary of its discovery, the joint research efforts of scientists around the world had led to the identification of a breakthrough cure.³ These advances in Hepatitis C, from discovery to cure, represent some of the most exciting discoveries in both liver disease and medicine.³

The Hepatitis C virus is blood-borne.⁴ There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C and prevention is only possible through avoiding contact with contaminated blood.⁴ The Hepatitis C virus can cause two types of infection: acute and chronic.⁴

Acute Hepatitis C⁴

In acute infections, the immune system clears the virus from the body without any treatment. An acute infection is rarely life-threatening. Between 15 and 45% of people who contract acute Hepatitis C will spontaneously clear the infection within six months of acquiring the infection.

Chronic Hepatitis C⁴

Chronic Hepatitis C infection occurs when the body does not spontaneously clear the virus. This is the case for 55 to 85% of people who contract Hepatitis C. Around 15 to 30% of people with chronic Hepatitis C will go on to develop liver cirrhosis within 20 years.

Epidemiology of Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C causes about 700,000 deaths per year worldwide.⁴ It is estimated that 15 million people in the WHO's EU Region are living with Hepatitis C, representing 2% of adults.⁵ However, the prevalence among people who inject drugs may be as high as 98%.⁵

Treatment for Hepatitis C

Chronic Hepatitis C can be treated with antiviral therapy to stop the virus from multiplying inside the body, thereby preventing liver damage. Cure rates for Hepatitis C with novel therapies can now reach up to 90% for the majority of patient groups.⁴ These exciting treatments, many of which are still being investigated, are called direct acting antiviral agents (DAAs).⁴ They directly and specifically target the Hepatitis C virus in every stage of its lifecycle.

There are different strains (genotypes) of the virus and some respond better to treatment than others.⁴ This means that patient management can still pose complex challenges alongside wider patient

concerns such as response to previous treatments and the stage of liver disease, which need to be considered. Screening and early diagnosis can increase the chance of successful treatment.⁴

Focus on Hepatitis B

Background on Hepatitis B⁶

Hepatitis B is a potentially life-threatening liver infection caused by the Hepatitis B virus. It is a major global health problem. It can cause both acute and chronic infection and puts people at high risk of death from cirrhosis and liver cancer.

A vaccine against Hepatitis B has been available since 1982. The vaccine is 95% effective in preventing infection, the development of chronic disease and liver cancer due to Hepatitis B.

Chronic Hepatitis B⁶

Chronic Hepatitis B is a leading cause of cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer worldwide. Children infected with the virus before the age of five are most likely to develop the chronic form of the infection.

Epidemiology of Hepatitis B⁶

Approximately 257 million people worldwide are chronically infected with Hepatitis B. Although less than 2% of the population in Western Europe and North America is chronically infected with Hepatitis B, chronic infection is common in some regions of the world. Between 2 and 6% of the adult population in sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia is thought to be chronically infected.

Treatment of Hepatitis B⁶

Current treatments for chronic Hepatitis B are safe and effective but at the moment can only suppress the virus replication, they cannot eradicate it or cure the patient. Hepatitis B, however, can be prevented by vaccination and the WHO recommends that all infants receive the Hepatitis B vaccine as soon as possible after birth.

References

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- 3 Ward JW. Hepatitis C: 25 years from discovery to cure. Nov 10 2014. Available from: <http://www.medscape.com/features/slideshow/hepatitis-c#1>. Last accessed: June 2021
- 4 World Health Organization. Hepatitis C Fact Sheet. Available from: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs164/en/>. Last accessed: June 2021.
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