

To mark World Hepatitis Day, the World Health Organization (WHO) is calling for scaling up testing and treatment for viral hepatitis, warning that the disease could kill more people than malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV combined by 2040, if current infection trends continue.

Under the theme of “One life, one liver”, WHO’s World Hepatitis Day campaign highlights the importance of protecting the liver against hepatitis for living a long, healthy life.

Furthermore, WHO adds that good liver health also benefits other vital organs – including the heart, brain and kidneys – that rely on the liver to function.

“Millions of people are living with undiagnosed and untreated hepatitis worldwide, even though we have better tools than ever to prevent, diagnose and treat it,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General.

“WHO remains committed to supporting countries to expand the use of those tools, including increasingly cost-effective curative medication, to save lives and end hepatitis.” He adds.

To help eliminate mother-to-child transmission, WHO recommends that all pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B during their pregnancy. If positive, they should receive treatment and vaccines should be provided to their newborns.

However, a new WHO report shows that of the 64 countries with a policy, only 32 countries reported implementing activities to screen for and manage hepatitis B in antenatal clinics.

In addition, the report also shows that of the 103 countries that reported, 80% have policies to screen and manage hepatitis B in HIV clinics, with 65% doing the same for hepatitis C.

Increasing hepatitis testing and treatment within HIV programmes will protect people living with HIV from developing liver cirrhosis and liver cancer.

After years of increasing treatment rates, the rise in the number of people accessing hepatitis C curative treatment is slowing.

WHO advocates for taking advantage of price reductions in medication to reaccelerate progress in expanding treatment.

A 12-week course of medication to cure hepatitis C now costs 60 US dollars for low-income countries, down from the original costs of more than 90 000 US dollars when first introduced in high-income countries. Treatment for hepatitis B costs less than 30 US dollars per year (\$2.4 US dollars per month).

For people who want to maintain liver health, WHO recommends hepatitis testing, treatment if diagnosed, and vaccination against hepatitis B. Reducing alcohol consumption, achieving a healthy weight, and managing diabetes or hypertension also benefit liver health.

Hepatitis causes liver damage and cancer and kills over a million people annually. Of the 5 types of hepatitis infections, hepatitis B and C cause most of the disease and deaths. Hepatitis C can be cured; however, only 21% of people living with hepatitis C infection are diagnosed and only 13% have received curative treatment. Just 10% of people living with chronic hepatitis B are diagnosed, and only 2% of those infected are receiving the lifesaving medicine.