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## **A report from World Hepatitis Alliance highlights almost 300 million people globally are living with chronic hepatitis B with most caused by mother-to-child transmission**

- *The World Hepatitis Alliance research shines a light on the 1.5 million people with newly acquired hepatitis B<sup>1</sup> each year*
- *Most of these were because of mother-to-child transmission which could have been prevented by the use of an existing vaccine and effective treatment for hepatitis B*
- *This white paper launches today ahead of World Hepatitis Day outlining the human impact of mother-to-child transmission with policy recommendations to ensure services are equitable and accessible to all*

**26 July, 2022, 00:01 CET**

Ahead of World Hepatitis Day on 28 July, the World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA) has launched a white paper outlining the human impact of mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B. The white paper highlights that 1.5 million (1.1 million-2.6 million) people newly acquired hepatitis B in 2019<sup>1</sup>. Most of these were as a result of mother-to-child transmission.

A safe and effective vaccine for hepatitis B has been available for more than four decades, but many countries have not yet harnessed its power effectively. More than half of infants worldwide still do not have access to the hepatitis B birth dose vaccine. In Africa, for example, only about 6% of infants receive timely birth dose vaccine<sup>2</sup>.

On World Hepatitis Day, 28 July, the WHA and its global network of 320 members in 100 countries will come together with the global health community to highlight the need to accelerate the fight against viral hepatitis and the importance of testing and treatment for the real people who need it.

Ahead of the day, WHA's white paper '*Mothers and babies can't wait – A call for action to end mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B*', makes policy recommendations, which, when carried out in addition to established guidelines, will ensure that prevention of mother to child transmission services are equitable, accessible, and available to all who need them.

### **Why is viral hepatitis important?**

- WHO estimated that in 2019, 296 million people were living with chronic hepatitis B<sup>3</sup>. Hepatitis B can cause liver scarring, liver failure and liver cancer
- By 2040, deaths from viral hepatitis are expected to exceed mortality from HIV, malaria, and tuberculosis combined<sup>4</sup>
- Approximately 9 in 10 infected infants develop chronic hepatitis B, and around 25% of them will die of liver-related complications later in life<sup>5,6</sup>
- The burden of hepatitis disproportionately affects the economically disadvantaged, with an estimated 197 million of hepatitis B-positive people (~79%) living in low- and middle-income countries in the African and Western Pacific regions<sup>7</sup>

### **Mothers and babies can't wait – A call for action to end mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B:**

Recommendations from the white paper include educational programmes and training to play a part in empowering and informing pregnant woman as a prenatal standard of care. These programmes must provide accurate information and share people's experiences of living with hepatitis B and be made accessible to all, to combat the stigma and misinformation surrounding living with hepatitis.

Individuals living with hepatitis B often face challenges due to the stigma associated to the disease. This may hinder both health-seeking behaviours and public health efforts aimed at promoting hepatitis B testing and

linkage to care. The paper recommends that health care professionals receive mandatory training to increase access to services and reduce hepatitis-related stigma in antenatal care.

Community-based organisations should be resourced and empowered to inform and support communities and play a recognised role in health care systems and hepatitis B elimination

Recommendations from the policy paper include funding and resources being provided to support WHO's Triple Elimination Initiative and the implementation of known, cost-effective prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, viral hepatitis and syphilis interventions.

WHO has combined the strategies for the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B, HIV and syphilis, within the context of the Triple Elimination Initiative. This strategy will address some of the discrepancies that currently exist between resourcing for hepatitis B, syphilis and HIV, as well as promoting integration.

**Danjuma Adda, President, World Hepatitis Alliance says:**

*"If we are to reach the 2030 hepatitis B elimination goals, we must address the systemic barriers to the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis around the world and put the focus and attention on the needs of women. Because of gender and socioeconomic disparities, the women who are most likely to be affected by hepatitis B are often the ones least likely to have access to the healthcare needed to prevent passing it to their new-borns."*

**Cary James, Chief Executive, World Hepatitis Alliance says:**

*"Funding the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis can help kickstart a rolling cycle of health improvement. This, in turn, will lead to greater health and quality of life for many. In this way, not only is the health of individual women improved, but that of whole communities."*

**Alice, USA, lives with hepatitis B and is passionate about raising awareness of hepatitis B:**

*"I still feel a profound stigma because of how I was raised. I was ashamed to share my health status until 2018, when I was invited to participate in the storytelling campaign of the Hepatitis B Foundation. It was storytelling in a circle with people living with hepatitis B and family members, the circle time enabled me to open up.*

*"I could hear people sharing their story around me and I felt comfortable. Once I started talking and sharing my experience, I felt the trust and comfort in this circle of people. I thought, yes, I'm fine, I can share my information with everyone. It's also a rewarding experience encouraging me to continue the outreach to promote hepatitis B prevention and vaccination."*

**WHA's full white paper: "Mothers and babies can't wait – A call for action to end mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B", can be downloaded from here: [www.worldhepatitisalliance.org/pmtct-report/](http://www.worldhepatitisalliance.org/pmtct-report/)**

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**Notes to editors:**

**Mothers and babies can't wait – A call for action to end mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B: Policy recommendations**

This report outlines the context and human impact of mother-to-child transmission. These recommendations, when carried out in addition to established guidelines, will ensure that PMTCT services are equitable, accessible, and available to all who need them.

- Hepatitis B education must be provided to pregnant women as a prenatal standard of care, allowing women to be empowered and informed.
- Health care professionals must be provided with mandatory training to increase access to services and reduce hepatitis-related stigma in antenatal care.
- Educational programmes providing accurate information and sharing people’s experiences of living with hepatitis B must be accessible to all to combat stigma and misinformation.
- Community-based organisations should be resourced and empowered to inform and support communities and play a recognised role in health care systems and hepatitis B elimination
- Funding and resources must be provided to support the implementation of known, cost-effective PMTCT of HIV, viral hepatitis and syphilis interventions.

### About Viral Hepatitis

Viral hepatitis is inflammation of the liver caused by a virus. WHO say that the total deaths cause by viral hepatitis, including acute cases, cirrhosis and liver cancer account for 1.1 million deaths globally in 2019. There are five different hepatitis viruses - hepatitis A, B, C, D and E. Hepatitis A and E is spread mainly through ingestion of contaminated food and water and the disease is often endemic in countries with a lack of safe water and poor sanitation, but rarely becomes chronic. Hepatitis B is transmitted through contact with the blood or other bodily fluids of an infected person and approximately 296 million people are living with chronic infections. Hepatitis C is mainly spread through blood-to-blood contact such as unsafe injection practices and inadequate sterilisation of medical equipment. Today, 58 million people are living with the disease. Hepatitis D is passed on through contact with infected blood and only occurs in people who are already infected with hepatitis B.

In total over 350 million people in the world are living with viral hepatitis. Each year over a million people lose their lives because of conditions related to acute hepatitis and chronic infection that cause liver cancer and cirrhosis. Chronic hepatitis B and C infections are the leading cause of liver cancer

Despite there being a vaccine and effective treatment for hepatitis B and a cure for hepatitis C – few countries in the world are on track to achieve the WHO target of eliminating viral hepatitis by 2030 (Polaris Observatory - CDA Foundation).

### About World Hepatitis Day

‘I Can’t Wait’ is the campaign theme for WHD 2022 which takes place on 28 July WHD will bring World Hepatitis Alliance and our global network of 318 members in 100 countries together to lead the campaign internationally.

With a person dying every 30 seconds from a hepatitis related illness – we can’t wait to act on viral hepatitis.

- People living with viral hepatitis unaware **can’t wait** for testing
- People living with hepatitis **can’t wait** for life saving treatments
- Expectant mothers **can’t wait** for hepatitis screening and treatment
- Newborn babies **can’t wait** for birth dose vaccination
- People affected by hepatitis **can’t wait** to end stigma and discrimination
- Community organisations **can’t wait** for greater investment
- Decision makers **can’t wait** and must act now to make hepatitis elimination a reality through political will and funding.

### The World Hepatitis Alliance

The World Hepatitis Alliance (WHA) is a patient-led and patient driven non-governmental organisation. With 320 members from 100 countries, WHA works with governments, national members and other key partners to raise awareness of viral hepatitis and influence global change. To achieve a world free from viral hepatitis, WHA provides global leadership in advocacy, awareness-raising and the fight to end its social injustice.

<https://www.worldhepatitisalliance.org/>

## References

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