

Hepatitis: It's closer than you think!

STAR HEALTH REPORT

Viral hepatitis kills about one million people every year. In addition, an estimated 500 million people experience chronic illness from their infection with hepatitis. It is a major cause of liver cancer and liver cirrhosis. Despite its staggering toll on health, hepatitis remains a group of diseases that are largely unknown, undiagnosed and untreated.

With a view to raising awareness of the different forms of hepatitis: what they are and how they are transmitted; who is at risk; and the various methods of prevention and treatment, World Hepatitis Day is being observed today with the theme "It's closer than you think". World Health Organisation (WHO) is urging governments to strengthen efforts to

fight viral hepatitis, to save millions from getting avoidable virus and facing its fatal complications.

There are five hepatitis viruses defined by types — A, B, C, D and E. Type B and C are of significant concern since a high proportion of people infected with these viruses may not experience symptoms at the early stage of the disease, and only become aware of their infection when they are chronically ill. These two viruses are the leading cause of liver cirrhosis and cancer, accounting for almost 80% of all liver cancer cases.

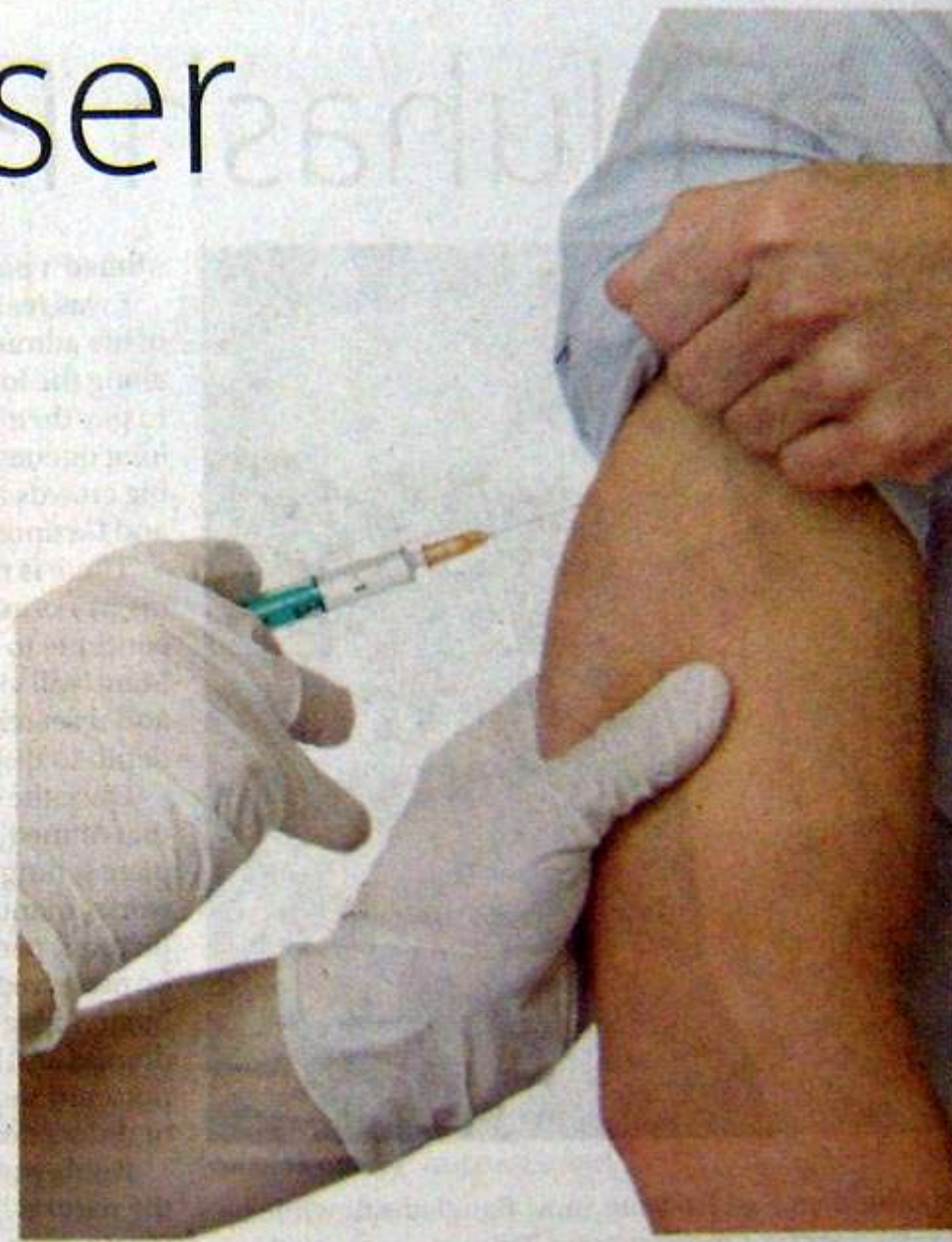
People can get hepatitis from either infected body fluids or contaminated food and water depending on the type of hepatitis. Types B, C and D are contracted through the blood of an infected person (e.g. through

unsafe injections or unscreened blood transfusions). Hepatitis B and C are also transmitted through unprotected sex.

Type D only infects persons who are already infected with type B. Types A and E are typically transmitted via contaminated water or food and closely associated with poor sanitation and poor personal hygiene (e.g. unwashed hands).

Vaccines are the best method of preventing most of these viruses. Effective vaccines are available for all the virus types, except C. Vaccine to prevent hepatitis E infection has not yet made available across the world.

Prevention strategy depends on the type of the virus. B, C and D are prevented through avoiding the ways they are contracted like safe blood transfusion, safe sex etc. Types A and E are pre-



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vented through maintaining hygienic practices such as hand washing with safe water, particularly before handling food and

avoiding drinking water and/or ice of unknown purity.

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Strategic use of HIV medicines could help end transmission

STAR HEALTH DESK

More strategic use of antiretroviral HIV medications can significantly reduce the transmission of the virus and reduce new infections dramatically, says World Health Organisation (WHO).

On the basis of this evidence, WHO advice for more strategic use of antiretrovirals includes:

- New guidelines for treating people with HIV who have uninfected partners (serodiscordant couples), recommending that antiretroviral therapy (ARVs) be

offered to the HIV-positive partner, regardless of the strength of his or her immune system, to reduce the likelihood of HIV transmission to the uninfected partner. Up to 50% of HIV-positive people in on-going relationships are estimated to have HIV-negative partners.

- ARVs should be given to all HIV positive pregnant women, regardless of the strength of their immune system, and has them continue taking the medicines for life. This not only treats HIV infected women and prevents transmission to their infants, it can also protect their partners.

- Evidence suggests that early treatment of HIV infected persons can make the virus silent, prevent the rebound of virus, reduce the need of lifelong medication. WHO is now reviewing recent studies that point to the potential health benefits of giving ARVs earlier, before the immune system starts to weaken.

- In addition to more targeted treatment approaches recent studies suggest ARVs can also be used to protect people who are currently HIV-negative, but are at high risk of becoming infected like intravenous drug users, sex workers etc.

Experts say that strategic use of antiretroviral HIV medications can save lives and keep people living with HIV healthy and can radically stop transmitting the virus to those who are non-infected. Prophylactic use of drugs could even prevent high risk people from contracting the virus.

PHOTO: AP

