

Combating the Silent Epidemic of Viral Hepatitis:

Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis

Viral hepatitis is a silent epidemic in the United States. Although it is a leading infectious cause of death and claims the lives of 12,000–15,000 Americans each year, viral hepatitis remains virtually unknown to the general public, at-risk populations, and policymakers; even health care providers sometimes lack knowledge and awareness about these infections. As a consequence, **most of the 3.5–5.3 million Americans living with viral hepatitis do not know that they are infected**, placing them at greater risk for severe, even fatal, complications from the disease and increasing the likelihood that they will spread the virus to others.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is committed to ensuring that new cases of viral hepatitis are prevented and that persons who are already infected are tested; informed about their infection; and provided with counseling, care, and treatment. On May 12, 2011, HHS issued *Combating the Silent Epidemic of Viral Hepatitis: Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis* which outlines robust and dynamic steps to increase viral hepatitis awareness and knowledge among health care

providers and communities, and improve access to quality prevention, care, and treatment services for viral hepatitis. Some of these life-saving actions already are well underway. Other actions, representing innovations in practice, technology, and therapy, will require new strategic directions and commitment.

ACTIONS

1. Educate health care providers and communities to reduce health disparities
2. Improve testing, care, and treatment to prevent liver disease and cancer
3. Strengthen surveillance to detect viral hepatitis transmission and disease
4. Eliminate transmission of vaccine-preventable viral hepatitis
5. Reduce viral hepatitis caused by drug-use behaviors
6. Protect patients and workers from health-care associated viral hepatitis

Hepatitis is a hidden epidemic with significant public health consequences in the United States

"Hepatitis" means inflammation of the liver and also refers to a group of contagious viral infections that affect the liver. The most common types are Hepatitis A (HAV), Hepatitis B (HBV), and Hepatitis C (HCV). They have different modes of transmission and can affect the liver differently. About 80,000 new viral hepatitis infections occur each year in the United States. HBV and HCV infection can each lead to chronic hepatitis, and as a result, are a major cause of liver cirrhosis and liver cancer and the leading cause of liver transplantation in the United States.

Because viral hepatitis can persist for decades without symptoms, most—as many as three-quarters—Americans infected with viral hepatitis are unaware of their status, and are not receiving care and treatment. As a result, these individuals are at greater risk for severe, even fatal,

complications from the disease and may unwittingly spread the virus to others.

HIV and Hepatitis

Persons with HIV also are disproportionately affected by viral hepatitis and related adverse health conditions. Because HIV, HBV [hepatitis B], and HCV [hepatitis C] share common modes of transmission, namely, sexual and intravenous drug-related activities, one third of HIV-infected persons are co-infected with HBV or HCV. The progression of viral hepatitis is accelerated among persons with HIV; therefore, persons who are co-infected experience greater liver-related health problems than non-HIV infected persons.

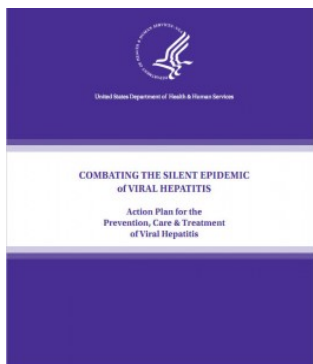
Viral hepatitis impacts Americans of all backgrounds but affects some populations more than others. In the U.S., half of all hepatitis B infected persons are **Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders** and approximately 15%–25% of all new HBV infections are among **men who have sex with men (MSM)**. **African-Americans** are twice as likely to be infected with hepatitis C when compared with the general population. **The only way to know if you are infected is a blood test.**

Viral hepatitis is preventable.

The best way to prevent HAV and HBV infection is by getting vaccinated. HCV infection can be prevented by avoiding behaviors that can spread the disease, such as injection drug use. **For those living with viral hepatitis, effective treatments are available.**

Implementation

The Action Plan for Viral Hepatitis describes opportunities to improve coordination of viral hepatitis



activities across the federal government and provides a framework for engaging nongovernmental organizations working to combat viral hepatitis. The Action Plan also sets priorities for HHS to facilitate the development of a public health and a primary-care infrastructure that is

needed for viral hepatitis prevention and care at the federal, state, and local levels.

GOALS

Full implementation of the Viral Hepatitis Action Plan could result in:

- An increase in the proportion of persons who are aware of their hepatitis B virus infection, from 33% to 66%
- An increase in the proportion of persons who are aware of their hepatitis C virus infection, from 45% to 66%
- A 25% reduction in the number of new cases of HCV infection
- Elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HBV

The actions presented in the Viral Hepatitis Action Plan primarily represent new efforts to begin in calendar year 2011, 2012, or 2013. Successful implementation of the Plan will require leveraging multiple opportunities. Some of the actions can be accomplished through improved coordination and integration of existing activities, whereas others are subject to the availability of funds.

Also critical to the overall success of this plan are policy-related support and system changes, which likely will be brought about by the Affordable Care Act and numerous national initiatives, including the National HIV/AIDS Strategy, the National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy, the HHS Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities, the National Vaccine Plan, and the HHS Action Plan to Prevent Healthcare-Associated Infections. Components

The first step toward achieving these goals is raising public awareness of this life-threatening disease. We must work to reduce the stigma surrounding hepatitis, and to ensure that testing, information, counseling, and treatment are available to all who need it. The hard work and dedication of health-care professionals, researchers, and advocates will help bring us closer to this goal...I encourage citizens, Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and communities across the Nation to join in activities that will increase awareness about hepatitis and what we can do to prevent it.

—President Barack Obama

World Hepatitis Day Proclamation, July 28, 2011

of each of these initiatives are reflected in the Viral Hepatitis Action Plan, resulting in a multifaceted, comprehensive approach to preventing viral hepatitis and improving the lives of millions of infected persons. Within a reformed health care system, the Viral Hepatitis Action Plan will offer an unprecedented opportunity to provide Americans, particularly those in vulnerable and underserved populations, with improved viral hepatitis prevention, care, and treatment services.

Successful implementation of the Action Plan is contingent not only on collaboration across the federal government, but also on stakeholder support and engagement of the diverse communities being served.

Please join the effort to realize the Action Plan's vision:

A nation committed to combating the silent epidemic of viral hepatitis

To learn more about the Action Plan, visit www.aids.gov/hepatitis/