

THE HEPATITIS EPIDEMIC IN NIGERIA: MOVING CONVERSATION ON HEPATITIS TO THE FRONT BURNER.

World Hepatitis Day, commemorated on 28 July every year, is an opportunity to raise awareness and garner commitments towards combating the hepatitis epidemic globally. Hepatitis, which is the inflammation of the liver cells, is a silent killer with significant public health concerns. It is a risk factor for liver cancer and one of the leading causes of cancer deaths in Nigeria. [Nigeria accounts for 26% of the global burden of Hepatitis.](#) While there are [five types of Hepatitis viruses](#), [Hepatitis B \(HBV\) and Hepatitis C \(HCV\) are the most common cause of liver cirrhosis and cancer.](#) According to the Nigeria HIV-AIDS Indicator and Impact Survey, 2018 (NAIIS 2018), the prevalence rates for HBV and HCV are 8.1% and 1.1%, respectively, among adults aged 15-64 years. Nigeria ranks in Africa as one of the countries that is hyper-endemic for HBV infection.

Hepatitis disease disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including those living with HIV, pregnant women, and individuals in rural areas. [With over 70% of health care spending in the country coming from out-of-pocket](#), regular screening for hepatitis may not be a key priority for most citizens, especially if it must be personally paid for. The other portion of the population that has access to some form of health insurance may not consider hepatitis screening except when requested by the physician during a visit to the health facility and, at this point, may already be presenting symptoms linked to hepatitis. Also, hepatitis screening is mostly not part of the annual screening tests listed by some Health Management Organizations (HMOs) in the country for their clients except when requested by the physician.

Aside from the cost implication of accessing hepatitis screening and treatment services, hepatitis is not much talked about, like HIV and TB. Limited awareness and education among the general population further puts it at a disadvantage. While there have been a significant number of health outreaches over the years on hepatitis, most of the time, it does not reach the most vulnerable subset of the population that is more at risk. Specifically, there is limited access to treatment and vaccination services in rural areas. Also, most outreaches and campaigns are one-offs, and referrals for identified persons may not be thoroughly followed up to ensure complete treatment. [Another concern is the stigma and discrimination against people living with hepatitis, and this is somewhat tied to the level of awareness and education of the population on hepatitis.](#)

As part of the WHO Extended Programme for Immunisation (EPI), [vaccination against HBV infection has been gradually implemented in Nigeria since 2004](#), coupled with improved measures to prevent mother-to-child transmission. The advent of vaccines about 20 years ago has been crucial in lowering childhood infections, yet the prevalence of HBV infection in the general population is still high in many contexts. The Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis was also established by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2016. [Its objectives included eradicating viral hepatitis as a public health issue by 2030.](#) While some states like Lagos, Kano, Katsina, Delta, Taraba, Plateau, Nasarawa, Zamfara, Imo, and Kaduna have launched free hepatitis screening campaigns, there is a need for other states to replicate this initiative and expand the scope to cover the entire populace.

On this year's World Hepatitis Day with the theme "It is time for action", there is an urgent call for collaboration by the government, private sector, development partners, and civil societies to jointly tackle hepatitis. This can be achieved by improving access to affordable screening, treatment, and vaccination services, particularly in underserved communities. It is also quite beneficial to raise awareness and education on hepatitis through launching sustainable public awareness campaigns and promoting community engagement to reduce stigma. Finally, surveillance systems must be strengthened to monitor the disease trends, track progress, and identify areas for improvement. As Nigeria strives to achieve Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, all hands must be on deck to eliminate Hepatitis.