GENERAL

Why Hepatitis B Screening saves Lives in India: The Silent Killer in Your Blood

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Millions of people in India suffer with a deadly illness for which there are no warning symptoms for years. Often referred to as a "silent killer," hepatitis B is a virus that targets the liver and damages the body without producing symptoms for decades. Most people find they are infected by the time major liver damage has already happened. The risk of hepatitis B is especially severe in rural areas, among minorities, and in underprivileged communities due to a lack of awareness and limited access to screening and treatment.

Hepatitis B: What is it?

A virus, hepatitis B, is transmitted from blood and some body fluids. In India, it is passed from mother to child at birth or via unsafe injections, surgeries, and unprotected sex. Once infected, someone might carry therus for a lifetime. These carriers pass the virus to others yet usually seem and feel healthy. The virus gradually scars the liver over time and can cause hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), a fatal liver cancer, or cirrhosis?liver failure.Hepatitis B: An All-Around Challenge for IndiaAbout 3% of India's population, or almost 40 million individuals, carry the hepatitis B virus. In rural, tribal, and economically underprivileged communities, this figure is far higher, though. Like so: Depending on the tribe, HBsAg (hepatitis B surface antigen) positivity ranges from 5% to over 20%; in remote locations like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, infection rates as high as 30% have been noted.

According to a rural Indian study, 5.2% of pregnant women tested positive?but more than 97% had never heard of hepatitis B and had never been tested.Millions of people are infected but uninformed, and without treatment many will suffer avoidable liver failure or cancer. These figures highlight a major public health disparity.

Risks in Early Life and PregnancyPregnancy is among the most perilous times for hepatitis B spread. Should a mother be infected and not identified, she may pass the virus on to her child during delivery. Without any intervention, the newborn has a 90% probability of becoming a lifetime carrier. Many times growing up without symptoms, these children later have major liver issues as adults.With a simple HBsAg test during pregnancy, an infected mother can be found, and her baby can be safeguarded by means of a combination of the birth dose of the hepatitis B vaccine and hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG). This puts the newborn's infection risk down to less than 5%.Many rural communities sadly lack regular screening for pregnant women, which results in avoidable infections in the next generation. Universal screening during pregnancy breaks the cycle of infection.

Silent for Years, Killing in Old AgeHepatitis B silently damages the liver for 20 to 40 years, usually going undetected. While the virus attacks their body, most people feel absolutely healthy. However, over time this can cause cancer, cirrhosis, and chronic liver disease.The liver may already be seriously compromised by the time symptoms including jaundice, stomach pain, or tiredness show up. The delayed diagnosis often means fewer treatment options and a greater risk of death for the elderly population, particularly for those in villages and towns who were never vaccinated as children.

Hepatitis B accounts for around 40?50% of all liver cancer cases in India. About 17,000 Indians die from liver cancer connected to hepatitis B annually; most of them are over 50. Early screening?even in those who feel well?can save lives with careful treatment and monitoring.

Why Screening Is Crucial?

The HBsAg test is a basic blood test designed to find out if a person has hepatitis B right now. It's reasonably priced, quick, and rather widely accessible. More importantly, the test can identify individuals who have a hepatitis B infection before they start to feel ill.

Knowing one's hepatitis B status results in:

- Access to antiviral treatments able to slow down or stop liver damage. ? Liver monitoring via frequent visits to identify early -stage complications. ? Possibly uninfected family members can receive vaccinations.
- It's crucial to halt the transmission of the disease to others, especially to today's newborns.Under the National Viral Hepatitis Control Program, the Indian government provides free screening and treatment; yet, awareness is still poor?especially in places most in need of it.Who should undergo screening?All pregnant women, ideally during their first prenatal visit, should undergo screens. ? People from slum, rural, and tribal areas?where infection rates are highest.
- Individuals undergoing regular blood transfusions or injections; healthcare professionals Anyone over forty who was not vaccinated in childhood; family members of known carriers, particularly spouses and children.

Shattering the Silence: The Part Awareness PlaysEarly diagnosis is hampered in great part by people not seeking testing unless they feel sick. This kind of thinking causes hepatitis B to go unseen in underdeveloped areas and villages until it is too late. "People often do not feel sick for many years," one public health advocate said. "There is little awareness in rural India."Offering on-site HBsAg testing, counseling, and vaccinations, community health workers and mobile clinics can significantly impact states like Gujarat, where volunteers trained under the Rann Bhoomi project started screening people in isolated villages, many of whom had never heard of hepatitis B before, and have already shown success for programs like these.The Value of Preventive Action in 2011, India included the hepatitis B vaccination in its universal immunization program. This shields newborns born today; millions of older children and adults were never vaccinated. Reaching these individuals still depends critically on catch-up vaccinations and adult screening.Hepatitis B is not a death sentence given awareness, screening, and treatment. We can control it and stop its dissemination. But without the first step?a basic test?none of this is feasible.

Avoid waiting for symptoms.Since hepatitis B lurks in your blood for years, it is dangerous. Unless you are tested, you will not know it exists until it is too late. Ask your doctor or neighborhood clinic for the HBsAg test, particularly if you are pregnant, over forty, or live in a rural or tribal area.Look out for yourself. Look out for your family. Speak out from the silence.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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