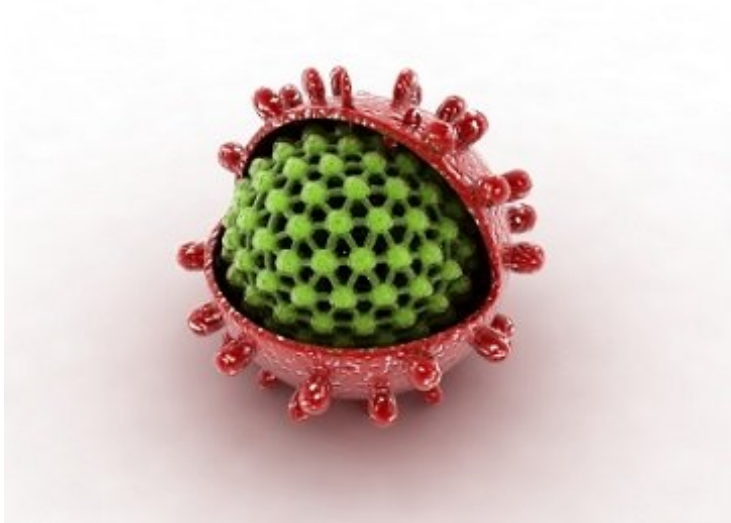


## Government to set up ten hepatitis surveillance labs

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The Government will set up ten regional laboratories through the National Communicable Disease Center (NCDC) for the surveillance of viral hepatitis, which kills more people than HIV/AIDS in India.

"The aim of these laboratories will be to find the burden of viral hepatitis in India by 2017 and to provide lab support for investigating outbreaks," Mr Lov Verma, secretary, union health ministry said at a roundtable consultation organised by the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences (ILBS) in collaboration with WHO Country Office for India on the occasion of World Hepatitis Day.

He also stressed on focusing on the preventive aspects rather than the treatment of viral Hepatitis given the limited health resources in India.

Mass awareness, education and setting up of universal guidelines for immunization are needed to fight the disease which kills three lakh people across the country every year.

"Standardization of blood bank practices and introduction of nucleic acid testing (NAT) is important for preventing blood transfusions related to viral hepatitis," Mr Verma said. There are five main hepatitis viruses, types A, B, C, D and E of which B and C are the most fatal as it can lead to liver cirrhosis and cancer. Hepatitis B and C are both blood borne and can be transmitted from man to man.

"Hepatitis B is responsible for 1.4 million deaths every year (compared to 1.5 million deaths from HIV/AIDS and 1.2 million from each of malaria and TB)," said Mr Shiv Sarin, director, ILBS.

"India has over 40 million hepatitis B infected patients (second only to China) and constitutes about 15 percent of the entire pool of hepatitis B in the world. Tribal areas in India have high prevalence of hepatitis B. Every year, nearly 600,000 patients die from HBV infection in the Indian continent. Outbreaks of acute and fulminant hepatitis B still occur mainly due to inadequately sterilized needles and syringes," explained Mr Sarin.

He further said that increasing public awareness about the disease and its symptoms and regular health check-up for people above 40 years of age is needed to check the incidence. "ILBS is committed towards making India Hepatitis Free by 2080," he added.

He also stressed on improving the access to treatment and availability as well as affordability of the drugs of Hepatitis B and C.

"The government should make these drugs free of cost, or at least, heavily subsidised, like they have done in cases of tuberculosis and HIV. If you look into the economic conditions, more than half of the Indian population can not afford that," he concluded.