

Egypt's Program to Treat Expatriates with HCV

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Q. What is the current burden of HCV among Egyptians?

Hepatitis C is a major public health problem in Egypt and the prevalence is among the highest in the world¹. The Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in 2008² showed a national seroprevalence of 14.7% with viremic prevalence of 9.7% among the 15 to 59 years old age group. A modeling study, however, including <15 years and >59 years, estimated the overall national seroprevalence to be 12.5% with 8.5% viremic prevalence; 6.3 (5.7–7.0) million people were, therefore, anticipated to be living with HCV infection in 2008³. The 2015 DHS⁴ included the age groups 1–59 years which brought the total seroprevalence to 6.3% and the viremic prevalence to 4.4% (7% in the age groups 15–59 years and 0.2% in those aged <15 years). The lower prevalence in those aged 15–19 years compared to the 2008 data points to a significant decrease in new infections in the age groups that were not previously represented. It could also be attributed to the ageing of the group with the highest prevalence and their shift outside the age range of 1–59 years in the 2015 DHS. The latter were the age groups who received anti-schistosomal injections in the 1950s and 1960s and have the highest burden of HCV infection⁵.

Q. What is the population of Egypt and how many Egyptians live abroad?

Egypt is one of the most populous countries in Africa and the Middle East. With an estimated population of 101.17 million in 2019, Egypt ranks 15th in the world⁶. The Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) announced that 9.5 million Egyptians live outside the country^{7,8}. Around 6.2 million expatriates live in Arab countries while 1.6 million are located in North and South America, 1.2 million are in Europe and 340,000 in Australia. According to their statistics, the main destinations for Egyptian migrants are Arabian countries. However, Italy ranks as the top European destination for Egyptian expat labor at 560,000, while 365,000 Egyptians work in France, 77,000 in Germany, 62,000 in England, 45,000 in Netherlands and 2,000 in Poland. African countries, in contrast, host the lowest numbers of Egyptian expatriates. Most of them live in South Africa which accounts for 85 percent of the total number for all African countries⁷. Given the large number of Egyptians living abroad and the current prevalence of HCV (4.4%), it is estimated that ~400,000 of Egyptian expatriates would be hepatitis C infected.

Q. What sets Egypt apart from other countries striving for elimination of HCV?

In 2006, the Egyptian Ministry of Health (MOH) acknowledged the epidemic of Hepatitis C and responded to the increased demands to address the problem through establishing a National Committee for Control of Viral Hepatitis (NCCVH). The committee was assigned to planning and implementing strategies for prevention and control of viral hepatitis, through an innovative model of care ensuring nationwide access to HCV treatment and continuous

patient care delivery⁹. The program developed a robust infrastructure with nationwide network of digitally connected viral hepatitis-specialized treatment centers to enhance state-funded treatment access¹⁰. The introduction of DAAs in 2014 led to substantial uptake and scale-up with Egypt's program becoming the largest in the world treating more than 2 million HCV-infected patients. This represents more than half of those treated globally in the last four years. Furthermore, the political advocacy and will to eliminate HCV in Egypt by 2020 led to undertaking an ambitious elimination model program to fulfil the WHO's elimination goals. A mass screening program was recently launched in a test and treat program targeting 60 million adult and adolescent Egyptians. So far, more than 30 million have been screened for HCV, in addition to non-communicable diseases, since the beginning of October 2018, in the first and largest global survey of its kind. The implementation of monitoring and evaluation programs together with strict surveillance will define the way forward and impact on morbidity and mortality from liver disease and incidence of liver cancer.

Q. Will Egyptian expats be able to access affordable HCV medicine?

For Egypt to announce elimination of HCV, the Presidential initiative is extending access of screening and treatment to Egyptian expatriates. All Egyptians have a unique identifying national identification (ID) number from birth registered on their birth certificates and later on their national ID cards once they turn 16 years. According to the "100 Million Healthy Lives" mass screening campaign, all Egyptians are entitled to the state-funded test and treat program when they travel back to their homeland. As a part of the screening campaign, testing points have been established in all sea ports and airports all over the country for Egyptians to access the rapid test when they arrive for visits or holidays. They are also screened for non-communicable diseases (diabetes, hypertension and obesity) and their data is registered and the dashboard is updated instantaneously in the central office. Once their test result is positive, they are scheduled and referred for HCV molecular testing in addition to other lab tests and then dispense their treatment from the NCCVH centers.

It is expected that access to care and treatment of HCV would be available for most of the expats holding other nationalities through their respective resident countries' health programs, albeit there are migrants with yet unestablished resident status or on a long waiting list. Accordingly, the Egyptian Government, will start a program for expats in collaboration with their respective resident countries to provide free testing and treatment, for both legal and illegal immigrants, to ensure elimination of HCV from the Egyptian population and also guarantee equity in providing services for a population with high burden of disease who might not have access to diagnosis and treatment.

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