

Prevention of hepatitis B infection: The appropriate strategy for India

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Abstract

Hepatitis B infection is a major global health problem with a high morbidity and mortality. With safe and effective vaccines available, it is now possible to prevent it. Many countries have started national hepatitis B control programmes but no attempt has been made to do this in our country. An analysis of the available data on the epidemiology of hepatitis B infection in India reveals that perinatal maternofetal transmission accounts for only a minority of hepatitis B virus carriers in India. Therefore, a policy of screening pregnant mothers for the presence of hepatitis B surface antigen and selective immunization of babies born to those who are surface antigen positive will have very little effect on the hepatitis B carrier rate in our population. Universal immunization of all newborns will have a much greater impact, it will be logistically simpler and more cost-effective--the cost of preventing one hepatitis B carrier being nearly one-fourth of that with selective immunization. We recommend that hepatitis B vaccine should be included in our country's expanded programme of immunization.

Reference

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