

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne infectious disease that targets the liver and can lead to serious liver damage, including cirrhosis and cancer, if left untreated.

Discovery of a breakthrough cure raised hopes of eradicating the hepatitis C virus (HCV). However, the disease still remains largely undiagnosed and untreated, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Approximately 50 million people had chronic infection in 2022 and 240,000 died.

Although progress has been made in making the cure available, HCV infections continue to rise among key populations, such as people who inject drugs, who make up 10% of those infected but 43% of new infections. People living with HIV are six times more likely to be HCV-positive; and chronic liver disease is a major cause of death for people with HIV. Rural, displaced, marginalized, and poor populations are disproportionately affected.

Direct-acting antivirals have revolutionized HCV treatment, curing over 95% of infections in 12 weeks with well-tolerated medications, but access to prevention, harm reduction, and care for at-risk populations remains limited due to stigma, inequalities, criminalization, and other barriers.

How we work

At Unitaid, we save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low and middle-income settings. We identify innovative treatments and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast.

As one of the largest funders in the fight against HCV, we are supporting the global elimination targets through prevention, testing and treatment, focusing on the most marginalized and vulnerable populations.

Preventing HCV through harm reduction: Harm reduction programs minimize the risks associated with drug use by providing needle exchanges, safe injection sites, and opioid agonist therapy. Integrating HCV testing and treatment into programs that serve people who inject drugs is essential to meet the World Health Organization (WHO) 2030 HCV elimination targets. Working with partners, we are piloting the use of low dead-space syringes, which reduce the risk of transmitting blood-borne infections like HCV and HIV when needles are shared; long-acting opioid agonist therapy, which decreases the frequency and urgency to inject drugs; and HCV testing and treatment.

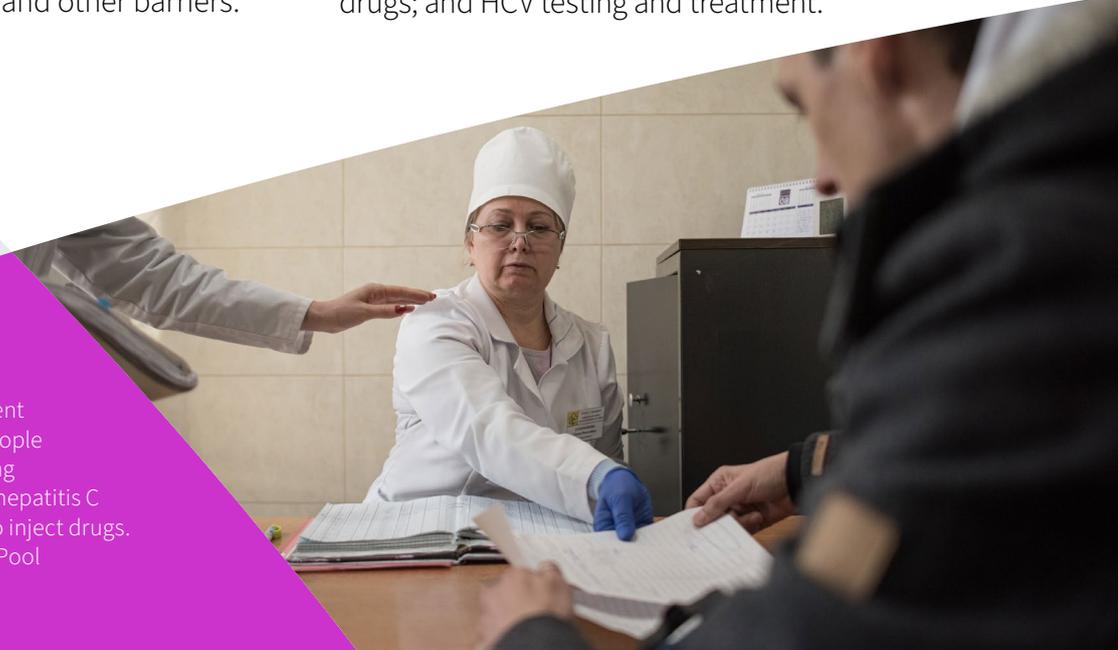


Photo: A patient registers for treatment at the All-Ukrainian Association of People with Drug Addiction. Unitaid is piloting harm-reduction programs including hepatitis C testing and treatment for people who inject drugs.
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Facilitating cost-effective diagnosis and treatment scale-up:

People living with HIV are at a higher risk of HCV, but siloed health systems often leave coinfections undiagnosed. Integrating HCV care into HIV clinics and harm reduction programs reaches more people, saves more lives and reduces costs.

Improving diagnostic tools and testing delivery:

Affordable, simple and reliable testing enables timely diagnosis and quicker access to treatment. Together with partners, we have supported the development of simpler tests, including rapid self-tests, and demonstrated how to use them in local health care facilities by non-specialist staff in low-resource settings improving access for marginalized and high-risk populations.

Our impact

Since 2015, we have simplified HCV testing, improved treatment affordability and proved that diagnosis and treatment at lower health system levels is feasible and effective. Our efforts have contributed to a nearly 40% decline in HCV-related deaths and a 30% reduction in total infections.

Key results:

- Introduced simple-to-use, rapid tests. With evidence generated by Unitaid projects, WHO validated this approach in 2021 and quality-assured the first HCV self-test in 2024.
- Addressed intellectual property barriers to develop and enable use of affordable generic medicines and removed other access barriers to HCV treatment in low- and middle-income countries.
- Informed global policies and guidelines to better equip health care facilities to test and treat HCV.
- Supported policy change in several countries through advocacy for new HCV drugs and tools and community engagement.



Looking ahead

Thanks to concerted global efforts, the tools to diagnose and cure HCV are now more affordable and accessible in most countries. However, access gaps persist: only 1 in 5 people with chronic HCV infection have access to highly effective medicines. Ending HCV requires more than just availability of diagnostics and treatments; it demands decisive action. Unlike HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria, there are no international funding mechanisms to support the scale-up of HCV services. National governments remain the primary funders, making our work to find more affordable tests and treatments even more critical. With effective tools Unitaid's work has helped make available, several 'pioneer' middle-income countries have started to finance and scale up HCV care and develop plans in line with the WHO elimination goals.

Looking ahead, we are working to introduce innovative tools and further simplify treatment by supporting the development of a long-acting treatment that could cure hepatitis C with a single injection. By leveraging these tools, we can continue to make significant strides towards the elimination of HCV as a public health threat.

About Unitaid:

We save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. We work with partners to identify innovative treatments, tests and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast. Since we were created in 2006, we have unlocked access to more than 100 groundbreaking health products to help address the world's biggest health challenges, including HIV, TB, and malaria; women's and children's health; and pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. Every year, more than 300 million people benefit from the products we've helped roll out.