

Residents want free hepatitis B treatment

By Martin Kitubi

Alice Nankwanga, a mother of a five-year-old and resident of Kireka in Wakiso district, had previously failed to get hepatitis B testing and vaccination services at both private and public health centres near her home due to high charges.

Nankwanga was among over 500 people who gathered at Kiruddu Hospital to get free services courtesy of a medical camp organised by Uganda Medical Association, an umbrella body for medical practitioners in the country.

"I have visited several health facilities and they charge between sh30,000 and sh50,000 for both testing and vaccination. I think the Government should roll out free hepatitis B vaccination countrywide," she said.

James Ssettimba, a resident

of Namasuba in Wakiso, also agreed, saying: "Several health centres in my area do not have such services. They refer us to big hospitals such as Kibuli, Nsambya, Mulago and Mengo. The Government should empower health facilities to handle hepatitis B just like it has done with HIV. Otherwise the hepatitis B virus will spread and will be hard to combat."

For people who test hepatitis B negative, it is recommended that they receive three hepatitis B vaccine shots within six months to achieve immunity, while those who test positive are required to take suppression drugs for life.

During the medical camp at Kiruddu Hospital, there were free general outpatient services and counselling.

Transmission

According to WHO, hepatitis

According to WHO, there is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B. Some of the remedies include maintaining comfort and adequate nutritional balance – replacement of fluids lost during vomiting and diarrhoea. The chronic infection can be treated with anti-viral drugs. Treatment can slow the progression of cirrhosis, reduce incidence of liver cancer and improve long-term survival. Any individual on hepatitis B treatment must continue with it for life. Adults and children over the age of five are more likely to show symptoms. Some of the signs include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine and jaundice.

TREATING HEPATITIS B

B (HBV) is a life-threatening viral infection that attacks the liver and can cause both acute and chronic diseases.

While some adults can get rid of the virus, others are

unable to.

Hepatitis B puts one at the risk of death from cirrhosis (liver damage) and liver cancer.

The hepatitis virus is transmitted through contact

with blood of an infected person or their bodily fluids such as saliva, tears, sweat, urine, semen and vaginal fluids.

Therefore, one can contract the virus through sexual intercourse, kissing and sharing needles.

It can also be transmitted from mother to child at birth or during breastfeeding, especially if the mother has cracked or exudative nipples.

According to Dr Ivan Kisuule of Kiruddu Hospital, hepatitis B in severity from mild illness of weeks and life-long illness and it can also be acute/chronic.

Acute hepatitis B virus is a short-term illness that occurs within the first six months of exposure to the hepatitis B virus, whereas the chronic one is life-long.

Health ministry response

The Director General of Health Services, Prof. Anthony Mbonye, said the ministry will conduct free vaccination for all by 2020.

"We started with areas in the north and east where the prevalence is high. But we will soon resume once we get funds from the Government," he said.

"We intend to start from the central region and then other parts of the country."

Other cases

Kisuule also expressed concern over the increasing sickle cell cases at Kiruddu Hospital and called for sensitisation.

"Parents associate sickle cell disease with witchcraft and most of them don't test for it, we therefore recommend that the state conducts a countrywide sensitisation exercise," he said.