

Epidemiology of hepatitis B virus infection in India

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Date: 1996

Abstract:

The average estimated carrier rate of hepatitis B virus (HBV) in India is 4%, with a total pool of approximately 36 million carriers. Wide variations in social, economic, and health factors in different regions may explain variations in carrier rates from one part of the country to another. Professional blood donors constitute the major high risk group for HBV infection in India, with a hepatitis B surface antigen positivity rate of 14%. Blood transfusions represent the most important route of HBV transmission among adults. However, most of India's carrier pool is established in early childhood, predominantly by horizontal spread due to crowded living conditions and poor hygiene. Acute and subacute liver failure are common complications of viral hepatitis in India and HBV is reckoned to be the aetiological agent in 42% and 45% of adult cases, respectively. HBV is reported to be responsible for 70% of cases of chronic hepatitis and 80% of cases of cirrhosis of the liver. About 60% of patients with hepatocellular carcinoma are HBV marker positive. Small numbers of patients have been reported to be infected with the pre-core mutant virus but none with the S mutant. Coinfection with hepatitis C virus or hepatitis delta virus is comparatively uncommon. In conclusion, hepatitis B is a major public health problem in India and will continue to be until appropriate nationwide vaccination programmes and other control measures are established.