

Health Ministry launches plan to eradicate hepatitis C

• By JUDY SIEGEL

The Health Ministry launched a program to identify an estimated 100,000 carriers of hepatitis C and gradually give them a new and very expensive drug that eradicates the deadly virus.

The ministry, which said the World Health Organization has called for the wiping out of the virus, said about 80 percent of carriers are unaware of the infection, making them able to infect others. An estimated 180 million people around the world are carriers of the virus, and some four million people are infected in an average year.

The announcement was made Tuesday, two days before World Hepatitis Day, aimed at increasing public awareness of the blood-borne infection, which can come back to haunt victims 10 or even 40 years after the initial infection.

Several drugs for different genotypes of the virus have been developed and were initially sold for \$90,000 per patient. The price has since been reduced to a few tens of thousands of dollars per patient, but it is expected to decline significantly as market competition increases.

The public committee that advises the government on expanding the health basket approved in 2015 the allocation of a

third of the entire sum of NIS 300 million for gradually treating HCV carriers, who after years can develop liver fibrosis, liver failure and liver cancer.

Hepatitis C is an infectious disease caused by the virus and is spread mostly through blood-to-blood contact such as transfusions (before the virus was screened out of donor blood), intravenous drug use and other means.

Numerous hemophiliacs became carriers decades ago before blood was screened, but there are still carriers who can develop the disease many years after infection. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union, HIV carriers and kidney dialysis patients, lab technicians who worked with direct exposure to blood until the 1990s, people who had tattoos done with non-sterile equipment and children of mothers who carried the virus are also at higher risk.

The disease becomes chronic and potentially fatal in 20% to 30% of all carriers. Donated blood began to be screened for HCV in 1992.

Its presence can be detected with a blood test. There is no vaccine against HCV, and the infection is a major cause for the need of liver transplants. Chronic infection can be cured about 90 percent of the time with treatments that include the medications sofosbuvir or simeprevir.

Shaare Zedek Medical Center Director-General Prof. Jonathan Halevy – a liver specialist who was head of the health basket committee that decided in 2015 to cover NIS 100m. worth of HCV drugs – told *The Jerusalem Post* that he was very pleased that a ministry campaign will begin to identify carriers, put them under medical supervision, follow up any progress of the disease and give them the pills to kill the virus when they have reached the relevant stage.

“The AIDS cocktail keeps that viral disease on a back burner but does not eradicate it; the HCV drugs do wipe the virus out,” said Halevy. “They are the next best thing to vaccines. Five companies make the drug, which will save the lives of tens of thousands of Israelis.”

Julio Borman, director of the voluntary liver health organization Hetz, which has advocated the inclusion of the drugs in the basket and screening of carriers, said he was very happy about the ministry’s new program.

“This is after years in which we warned of the importance of the topic. Until today, someone who discovered he was an HCV carrier found out by chance. There are many people who don’t have a clue that have a serious infectious virus that requires treatment and a change in lifestyle.”