

OPINION

Lowering liver cancer risk

Liver cancer is the fourth most common cancer in the country, with 10,594 new cases and 9,953 deaths reported in 2020. Its incidence in men is about two and a half times that of women, according to the Department of Health (DoH).

The American Cancer Society said that common symptoms of liver cancer are unintended weight loss; loss of appetite; feeling very full after a small meal; nausea or vomiting; an enlarged liver, felt as fullness under the ribs on the right side; and an enlarged spleen, felt as fullness under the ribs on the left side.

Included in the symptoms are pain in the abdomen or near the right shoulder blade; swelling or fluid build-up in the abdomen; itching; yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice); fever; enlarged veins on the belly that can be seen through the skin; and abnormal bruising or bleeding. It is important to consult your doctor if you experience these symptoms.

The most common risk factor for liver cancer is chronic (long-term) infection with hepatitis B virus (HBV) or hepatitis C virus (HCV). "People infected with both viruses have a high risk of developing chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis, and liver cancer. The risk is even higher if they are heavy drinkers who consume at least six alcoholic drinks a day," said the American Cancer Society.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that one in 10 people in the country has chronic hepatitis B, and six in 1,000 have chronic hepatitis C.

The DoH noted that liver cancer is much more common in countries where HBV carriers are prevalent, such as the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries, as compared to most developed countries where hepatitis B is less prevalent.

The HBV and HCV can spread from person to person through sharing contaminated needles (such as in drug use), unprotected sex, and childbirth.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that all children, as well as adults at risk, get the HBV vaccine to reduce the risk of hepatitis and liver cancer. While there is no vaccine for hepatitis C, the best way to prevent it is by avoiding behaviors that can spread the disease.

The CDC recommended getting tested for hepatitis C because treatments can cure most people with hepatitis C in 8 to 12 weeks. You can also lower your risk for liver cancer by not smoking, limiting alcohol intake, and maintaining a healthy weight.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has made the management of Filipino patients with liver diseases more challenging, said Dr. Jenny Agcaoili-Conde, public relations officer of the Hepatology Society of the Philippines (HSP). "At the start of the pandemic, surgery of many patients with liver disease had to be canceled or deferred because we knew little about COVID-19 at that time."

While telemedicine enabled doctors to provide continuity of care, patients with liver diseases require strict monitoring through diagnostic tests. "To undergo these tests, they have to go out of the house and risk potential exposure to the coronavirus. It's a difficult time for both patients and doctors," Dr. Agcaoili-Conde said.

Hopefully, with the progressive decline in COVID-19 cases in the country, continuity of care for patients with liver diseases will improve.

She also noted the country's low hepatitis B vaccination coverage. "The hepatitis B vaccine has been part of the government's vaccination program since 1992. However, only 45% of babies born in 2014 were given the first vaccine dose. Completion of the 3-dose hepatitis B vaccine regimen dropped to only 77% in 2012. Moreover, the pandemic impacted supply chains, further hindering the availability of medicines and vaccines."

The WHO estimated that only 50% of newborn infants in the country are administered with the hepatitis B birth dose within 24 hours after birth.

Under the auspices of its mother organization, the Philippine Society of Gastroenterology (PSG), HSP is working with the DoH and other partner stakeholders to promote liver health awareness and early detection of liver diseases, particularly liver cancer and viral hepatitis, among the general public. It also established the Philippine Liver Education online platform which aims to serve as the reliable virtual learning resource for liver disease management for Filipino physicians with special interest in hepatology.

TEODORO B. PADILLA is the executive director of Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines (PHAP), which represents the biopharmaceutical medicines and vaccines industry in the country. Its members are at the forefront of research and development efforts for COVID-19 and other diseases that affect Filipinos.



MEDICINE CABINET TEODORO B. PADILLA

Pneumonia vax strategy needs update, say experts

THE Philippines' pneumonia vaccine strategy — which uses only one of three vaccine formulations recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) — is outdated and needs to be reviewed, according to medical experts.

"It's unfortunate that the updating of the [national] formulary isn't as regular as we want it to be. This is in the hands of the regulatory officers of the Department of Health," said Dr. Vicente Y. Belizario, Jr., dean of the University of the Philippines College of Public Health (UP-CPH), at a March 23 forum.

He recommended that the formulary be reviewed annually so that new cost-effective products "with more promising results can be considered for inclusion."

The United Nations children's agency UNICEF said in 2019 that a child dies of pneumonia every 39 seconds, making it one of the leading killer diseases for children.

In the Philippines, pneumonia was found to be the seventh top cause of death in the country, accounting for 4.3% of total deaths from January to November 2021.

"A strong immunization system is paramount for prevention. There's always new evidence coming out and we need to keep our doors open as the latest one may be the key to update our healthcare policies," said Dr. Belizario.

The only pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV) being used in the Philippines' national immunization program (NIP) is PCV13, which was recommended by the Formulary Executive Council in 2014 based on locally relevant serotypes.

UP-CPH reiterated that "a reassessment of PCV use in the country with the inclusion of all three pneumonia vaccine formulations may be warranted."

Though vaccines for invasive pneumococcal disease (IPD) caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae* in infants and children from six weeks up to two years of age have been available since



2009, pneumococcal pneumonia remains to be the number one cause of death in infants and young children under five, it said in a statement.

The local program lacks two vaccines — PHiD-CV and SIIL-PCV — that can provide direct protection to serotypes or variations of the *Streptococcus pneumoniae* bacteria.

Two years ago, PHiD-CV was recommended to the DoH by the Health Technology Assessment Council, according to Dr. Maria Margarita M. Lota, UP-CPH medical microbiology professor and research project leader.

"Knowing all the evidence for the three PCVs, we can see that they are comparable. This means that we can now include these three choices so we can have greater access and availability for the NIP as well as for the private sector," Dr. Lota said.

She emphasized that the WHO declared these vaccine formulations to be at par with — and not inferior to — each other.

CHANGING EPIDEMIOLOGY

According to WHO, evidence suggests that there has been a substantial change in the epidemiology of pneumococcal disease, which warrants review of the choice of vaccine and consideration of ones that offer direct protection against the prevailing serotypes.

"There's a need to enhance surveillance methodology, which will assist with choice of our PCV since they all vary in their protection against serotypes," she said.

Because epidemiology is always changing, surveillance is crucial, agreed Dr. Maria Rosario Z. Capeding, pediatrician and infectious disease specialist at the Asian Hospital and Medical Center.

"Remember that [with] each serotype, the predominance varies from individuals to countries, which is why we call it a changing epidemiology of serotypes," she said.

Her epidemiological research showed that 100 serotypes of the bacteria that cause pneumococcal pneumonia have been identified in 2020.

UP-CPH also cited "potential savings from using a new and possibly more cost-effective formulation, the cost of averting resistant serotypes, and the availability of a new PCV with a different but comparable serotype coverage and lowest vaccine price."

"Prevention tops everything else. If you prevent disease, you will prevent our healthcare system from being overwhelmed," said Dr. Lulu Bravo, executive director of the Philippine Foundation for Vaccination and convenor of the Vaccine Solidarity Movement. — **Brontë H. Lacsamana**

Widely used diabetes drug linked to birth defects risk, according to study

ONE of the world's most widely prescribed diabetes drugs may be linked to major birth defects in the offspring of male patients who were taking it ahead of the babies being conceived, according to a new study from Denmark released on Monday.

Metformin, among the most common and often initially prescribed treatments for type 2 diabetes, was associated with a 1.4 times greater risk of birth defects in boys whose fathers were taking the drug compared with those born to fathers who were not, researchers from the University of Southern Denmark and Stanford University in the United States found.

In both groups, the mothers had no history of diabetes or hypertension.

The study's authors, as well as independent experts, pointed to several key limitations of the data published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Researchers did not know whether the fathers took the medication as prescribed, or if they had worse control of their diabetes, which could also be linked to a higher risk of birth defects. The study showed that the risk for babies born to men taking insulin rather than metformin were not increased.

Channa Jayasena, head of andrology at Imperial College London, who was not involved in the work, called the results "thought-provoking but inconclusive."

"Men with diabetes should not be dissuaded from taking metformin, but this is worth looking at more closely," he added.

Metformin, available as a generic drug, is a first-line treatment for type 2 diabetes, a growing epidemic worldwide.

It is usually prescribed when diet and physical activity are not enough to control blood sugar levels and typically before more expensive branded diabetes drugs. It works to improve how the body handles insulin. Around 120 million people have been prescribed the drug across the globe.

In the study of 1,116,779 births in Denmark from 1997 to 2016, the researchers found that 5.2% of babies born to men who had been taking metformin had birth defects, particularly genital defects in boys. Among the rest of the population, the rate was 3.3%.

Babies were considered to be exposed to a diabetes drug, including metformin or insulin, if the father had filled at least one prescription during the three months before conception, when the fertilizing sperm were developing.

The researchers said more study was needed, but suggested that men taking metformin consider switching to another treatment when trying to conceive.

"If patients would like to switch to an alternative, they should contact their doctor," Maarten Fensink, a public health professor at the University of Southern Denmark and a study author, told Reuters, adding that the best treatment for type 2 diabetes remains lifestyle interventions such as dietary changes and weight loss.

"This could be an extra reason to put more priority on paternal health," he added. — **Reuters**

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ASC welcomes the 2022 Board of Directors

The Ad Standards Council (ASC) celebrates its 14th anniversary and induction of its Board of Trustees on March 31, 2022 at the Makati Diamond Hotel. The inducting officer is the Honorable Ruth B. Castelo, Under-Secretary of the Department of Trade and Industry Consumer Protection Group.

The ASC is the self-regulatory organization that reviews advertising and brand communications materials to safeguard consumer protection. ASC works together with partners DTI and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and other government units.

Also featured at the event is Lloyd Luna, author and international motivational speaker.



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