WHO Adds New HIV, Hepatitis C Meds to Its Essential Medicines List

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The World Health Organization (WHO) recently released new guidance on hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment, antibiotic resistance and HIV care and prevention in its updated 2017 Essential Medicines List (EML), a recent press release from the organization reports.

This year's update adds a new combination therapy that can treat all six genotypes of hepatitis C, a new, safer HIV medication and updated advice on using tenofovir as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV infection. The WHO's EML is used by many countries around the world to guide decisions about which medicines they should ensure are available for their populations and as an international benchmark for increasing access to treatment.

In the hepatitis C arena, the group has added sofosbuvir + velpatasvir (sold in the United States under the brand name Epclusa), the first combination therapy to treat all six genotypes of hepatitis C to its recommended list. WHO also added the HIV drug dolutegravir (aka Tivicay) in response to recent evidence showing the medicine's safety, efficacy and high barrier to viral resistance. The update also includes PrEP (tenofovir alone or with emtricitabine or lamivudine), a major win for HIV prevention advocates.

The 2017 EML also includes the biggest revision of the antibiotics section in the list's 40-year history. For the update, global health experts grouped antibiotics into three categories — ACCESS (for first-line treatments), WATCH (second-line therapies) and RESERVE (last-resort options) — with recommendations on when drugs in each category should be used. The change aims to ensure that antibiotics are available around the world when needed, that the right antibiotics are used to treat the right infections, and to guard against the growing threat of drug resistance.

Other additions to the list include two oral cancer treatments, new pediatric formulations of medicines for tuberculosis, as well as fentanyl skin patches and methadone for pain relief among cancer patients. According to the WHO Expert Committee on the Selection and Use of Essential Medicines (which updates the EML every two years), global health experts considered 92 applications for about 100 new medicines this year, ultimately adding 55 total treatments to the list.

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