5. Accelerate hepatitis B control

The Western Pacific Region was the first WHO Region to decide to reduce chronic hepatitis B (hepB) infection by incorporating the vaccine into countries’ immunization programmes. By ensuring infants receive three doses of vaccine, with the first dose administered within 24 hours of birth, countries have helped drive the regional hepB prevalence among 5-year-old children to less than 1% from over 8% in 1990.

Antenatal education and coordination of outreach efforts between village health volunteers and health facility workers have helped further ensure that newborns receive a timely birth dose. In 2016, 83% of infants in the Region received their birth dose within 24 hours, well above the global average of 39%.

Countries with suboptimal hepB coverage have acted to increase access for unvaccinated children. Solomon Islands is the sixth country in the Region to show that delivering hepB vaccine outside the cold chain is safe and effective, increasing their timely birth dose coverage among facility births to 68% from 30% and among home births to 24% from 4% from 2015 to 2016. Solomon Islands is working to expand this successful pilot study to three provinces for all health facilities that lack cold chain and for home births.

Countries with high hepB vaccine coverage are also increasing efforts for the elimination of mother-to-child transmission (EMTCT) of the disease. China, for example, has high and sustained hepB vaccine coverage and high antenatal screening. Most exposed newborn babies receive hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG) along with the timely birth dose. Now China is developing modelling studies to determine whether additional interventions, such as antiviral treatment of mothers with high viral loads, will be needed to achieve EMTCT. Cambodia and Mongolia are also using modelling data to make informed decisions on the cost and impact of adding additional hepB interventions, such as HBIG and antiviral treatment, to strengthen their efforts to achieve EMTCT.

A child is vaccinated against hepatitis B in Cambodia. Every child should receive a timely birth dose plus at least two additional doses to be protected against the virus. Child vaccination is the most effective tool to prevent chronic infection for entire populations.