

Community-based interventions to increase hepatitis B virus and hepatitis C virus infections screening among at-risk migrant and refugee populations in Italy, Greece, and Spain: 1-year results of the VH-COMSAVAC project

Contact information

Dr Camila Picchio
(camila.picchio@isglobal.org)
Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal)

C. Picchio,^{1,2} A. Nicolàs,¹ G. Kalamitsis,³ I. Liatsou,⁴ N. Panera,⁴ I. Peña Ruiz,⁵ C. Arcas,⁵ S. Chamorro –Tojeiro,^{6,7} JA. Pérez Molina,^{6,7} G. Colucci,^{8,9} A. Pezzullo,¹⁰ D. Pascucci,¹¹ A. Requena,¹ JV. Lazarus^{1,12}

¹Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal), Hospital Clínic, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain, ²Drexel University Dornsife School of Public Health, Department of Community Health and Prevention, Philadelphia, United States, ³Hellenic liver patient association “Prometheus”, Athens, Greece, ⁴Hellenic Liver Patients Association “Prometheus”, Athens, Greece, ⁵Salud Entre Culturas, National Referral Unit for Tropical Diseases, Infectious Diseases Department, University Hospital Ramón y Cajal, Madrid, Spain, ⁶National Referral Unit for Tropical Diseases, Infectious Diseases Department, University Hospital Ramón y Cajal, IRYCIS, Madrid, Spain, ⁷Centro de Investigación Biomédica en Red de Enfermedades Infecciosas (CIBERINFEC), Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Madrid, Spain, ⁸Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Fondazione IRCCS Ca' Granda Policlinico, Milan, Italy, ⁹Policlinico of Milan, Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Milano, Italy, ¹⁰Section of Hygiene, Department of Life Sciences and Public Health, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Rome, Italy, ¹¹Department of Life Sciences and Public Health, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Rome, Italy, ¹²CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy (CUNY SPH), New York, United States

Introduction & Aim

- **Migrants residing in Europe** who originate from regions with a mid/high prevalence of hepatitis B (HBV) and hepatitis C (HCV) might be **unaware of their status due to the inadequacy of testing and vaccination in their home countries** or complicated care pathways in their host countries.
- Migrants suffer **structural, cultural, and legal barriers to accessing healthcare** which leads to an **underutilization of services**.
- **Viral hepatitis Community Screening, Vaccination, and Care (VH-COMSAVAC)** is an EU co-funded project in Italy, Greece, and Spain which aims to **scale-up community-based HBV and HCV testing models of care among migrants and refugees** with documented mid/high incidence and prevalence using **simplified diagnostic tools** and **person-centred referral processes**. The project is ongoing and 1 year of data is presented here.

Methods

- **Study design:** Prospective cohort study
- **Timeline:** November 2022 – December 2023
- **Location:** Barcelona/Catalonia (Spain), Madrid (Spain), Athens (Greece), and Milan (Italy).
- **Implementation:** The VH-COMSAVAC model of care (Figure 1) is implemented in all settings. Each setting structured their care pathways according to operational and legal feasibility. Community health workers and intercultural mediators supported screening interventions in Spain.

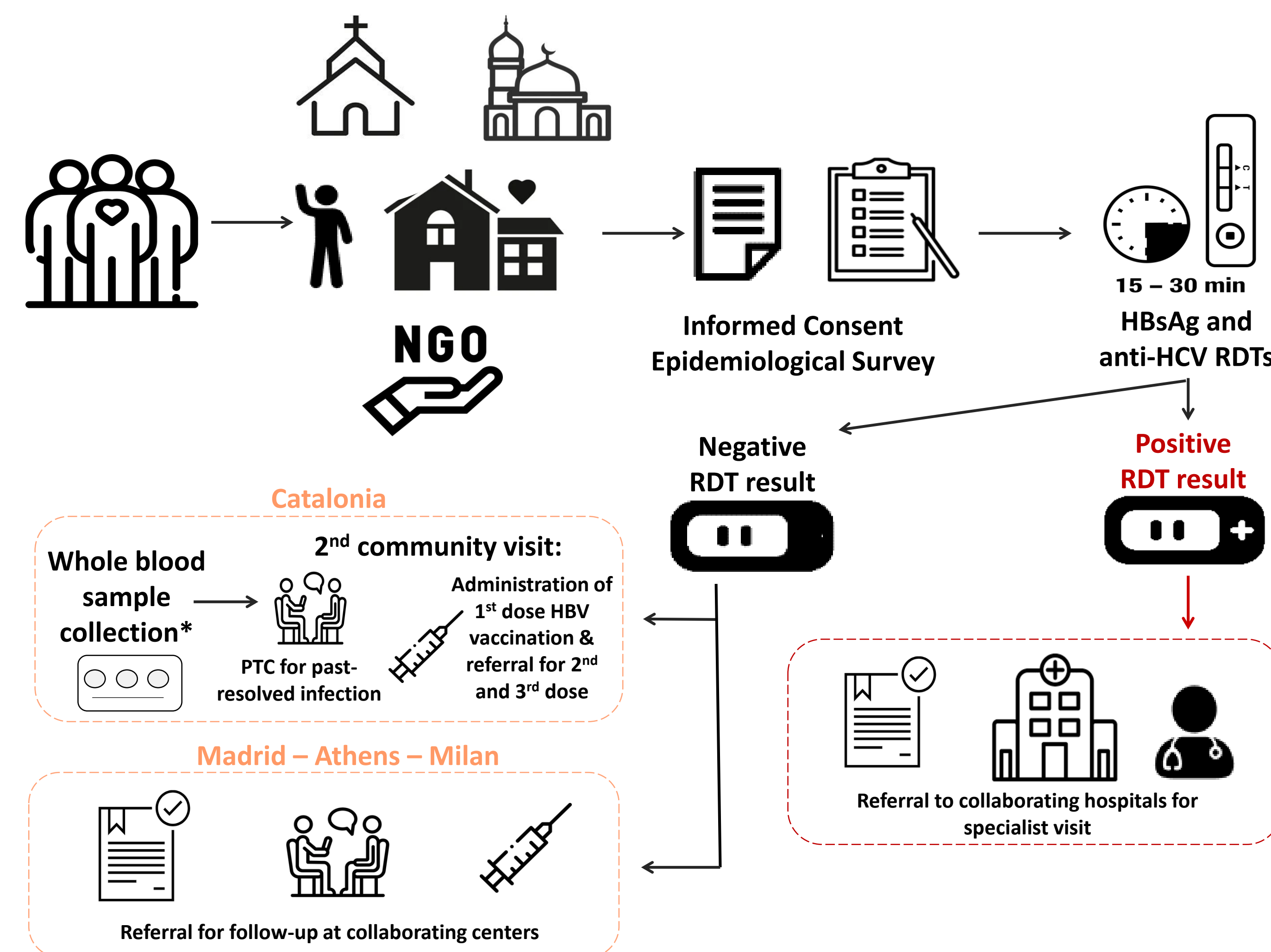
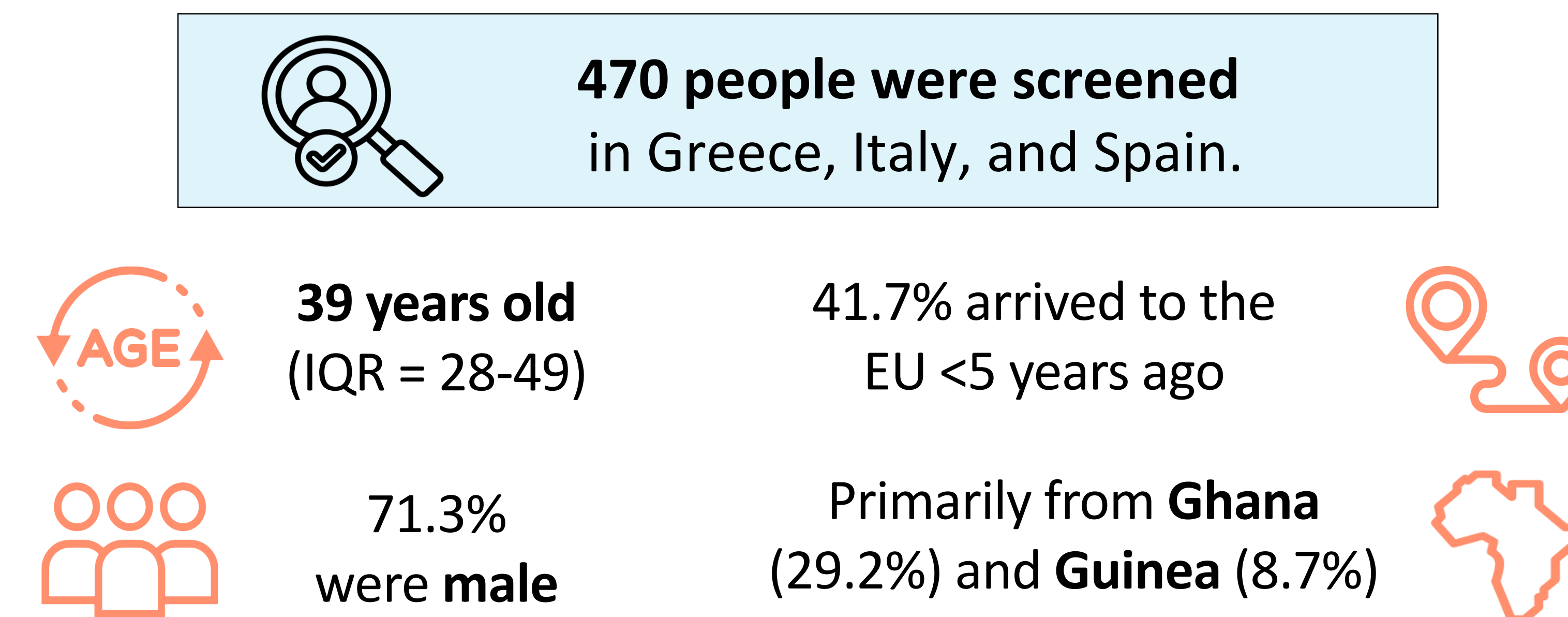


Figure 1. VH-COMSAVAC Model of care. “PTC” refers to post-test counselling.
*Performed using plasma separation cards (PSCs).

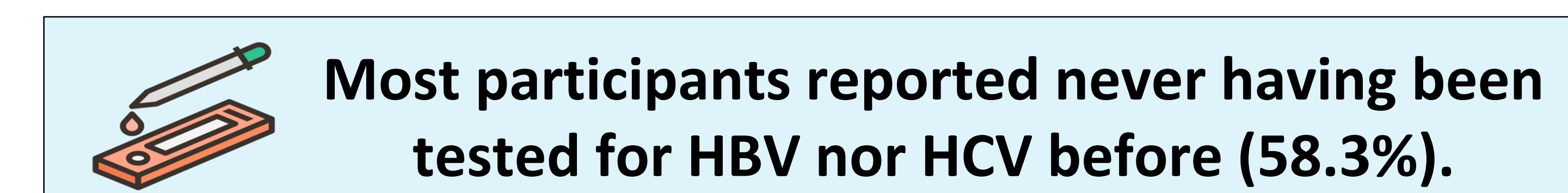
Results

Participants & Sociodemographics:



Reported Knowledge, Screening & Vaccination:

- Less than half (43.0%) knew what HBV and/or HCV was.
- Only 8.3% of participants reported being fully vaccinated against HBV.



Prevalence & Risk Factors:

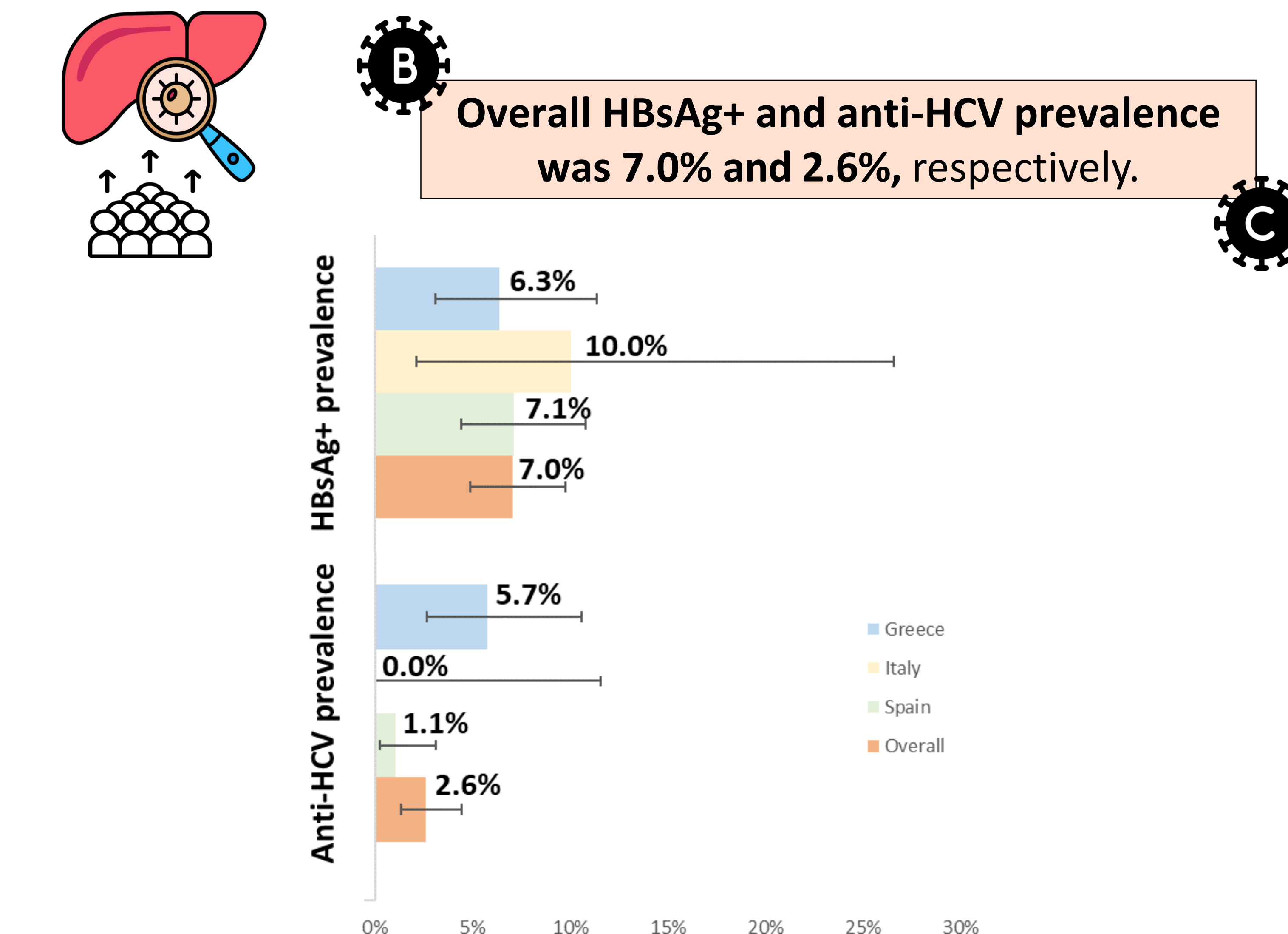


Figure 2. Overall and country-specific HBsAg+ and anti-HCV prevalence and 95% CI.

- HBsAg+ positivity was not associated with any risk factor, but anti-HCV+ was associated with having had multiple sexual partners, an unprotected sexual encounter, and drug use ($p < 0.05$).

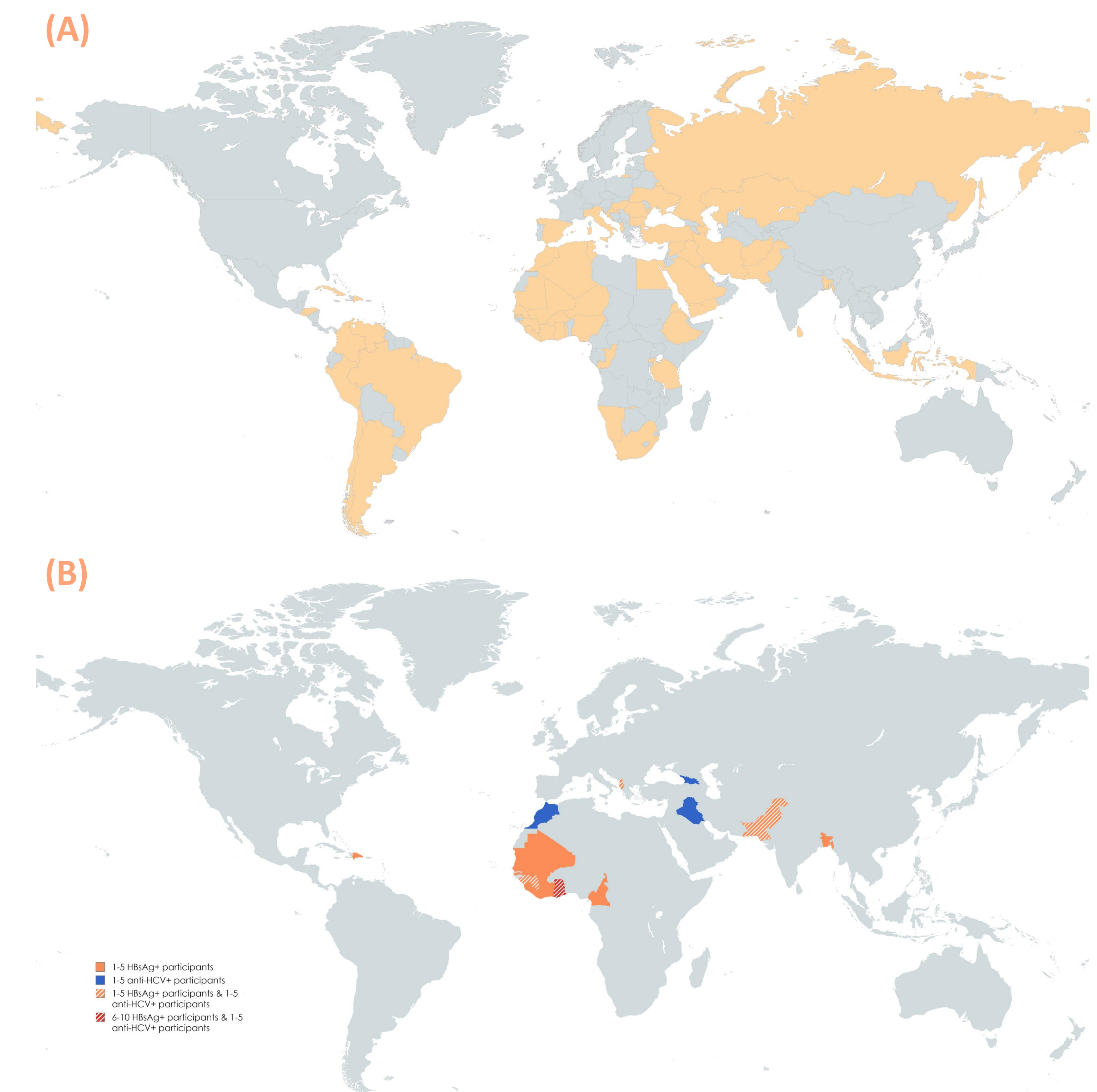


Figure 3. (A) Participants' countries of birth across all study sites
(B) HBsAg+ and anti-HCV+ participants' countries of birth.

Conclusion

Community-based viral hepatitis testing strategies which are **culturally and linguistically appropriate** are **effective models for identifying and providing care to migrant and refugee populations** at high risk of HBV and HCV infections who may otherwise not engage in care, which aligns with the 2030 WHO hepatitis elimination goal.

Funding statement: This study is co-funded by the European Commission through the VH COMSAVAC Project (No. 101079958).