

MEASLES OUTBREAKS CONTINUE UNABATED: WHO

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Children under the age of five accounted for most of the 1,40,000 people who died from measles in 2018, according to new estimates released by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Center for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) on behalf of the Measles and Rubella Initiative, early this week.

Measles is a highly-contagious virus and spreads rapidly in unvaccinated children, causing symptoms from rash to blindness, pneumonia to death. Rubella virus is the primary cause of congenital rubella syndrome leading to abortions and children born with birth defects of heart, eye and brain. Both measles and rubella can be prevented by a highly-effective Measles-Rubella (MR) vaccine.

India initiated one of the world's largest measles-rubella campaign to eliminate measles and control rubella in the country. By November 2019, more than 324 million children and adolescent between 9 months to 15 years of age have been vaccinated with one dose of MR vaccine.

"The number of children killed last year by a preventable disease is proof that measles anywhere is a threat to children everywhere. When children go unvaccinated in significant numbers, entire communities are at risk," said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF's executive director.

Data released by WHO has noted that measles cases more than doubled in 2018 compared to 2017. While final data for 2019 is not yet available, reports indicate that the number of measles cases continues to be dangerously high.

According to WHO, there were 3,53,236 reported cases in 2018 compared to the provisional reporting of over 4,13,000 cases by mid-November in 2019. Together, this marks a three-fold increase compared with this same time in 2018.

The health organisation has noted that poor vaccination coverage and large pockets of unvaccinated children have resulted in devastating measles outbreaks in many parts of the world – including in countries that had high coverage rates or had previously eliminated the disease.

"In some cases, conflict, security or a breakdown in services are making it hard to reach children in remote or hard-to-reach areas. In others, parents are not vaccinating their children due to complacency, mistrust or misinformation about vaccines," noted a release issued by UNICEF.

More than an estimated 19 million children worldwide missed out on the first dose of the measles vaccine by their second birthday in 2018. UNICEF and WHO report that the coverage of the measles vaccine has stagnated over the past decade, creating the pathway to current outbreaks. In 2018, only 86% of children globally received the first dose of measles vaccine, and fewer than 70% received the second recommended dose. This is lower than the 95% coverage needed to prevent outbreaks.

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