

Media Update

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UNICEF

PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF and WHO warn of ‘perfect storm’ of conditions for measles outbreaks, affecting children

Reported worldwide measles cases increased by 79 per cent in the first two months of 2022, compared to the same period in 2021, as WHO and UNICEF warn conditions ripe for serious outbreaks of vaccine-preventable illnesses

NEW YORK/ GENEVA, 28 April 2022 – An increase in measles cases in January and February 2022 is a worrying sign of a heightened risk for the spread of vaccine-preventable diseases and could trigger larger outbreaks, particularly of measles affecting millions of children in 2022, warn WHO and UNICEF.

Pandemic-related disruptions, increasing inequalities in access to vaccines, and the diversion of resources from routine immunization are leaving too many children without protection against measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases.

The risk for large outbreaks has increased as communities relax social distancing practices and other preventive measures for COVID-19 implemented during the height of the pandemic. In addition, with millions of people being displaced due to conflicts and crises including in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Somalia and Afghanistan, disruptions in routine immunization and COVID-19 vaccination services, lack of clean water and sanitation, and overcrowding increase the risk of vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks.

Almost 17,338 measles cases were reported worldwide in January and February 2022, compared to 9,665 during the first two months of 2021. As measles is very contagious, cases tend to show up quickly when vaccination levels decline. The agencies are concerned that outbreaks of measles could also forewarn outbreaks of other diseases that do not spread as rapidly.

Apart from its direct effect on the body, which can be lethal, the measles virus also weakens the immune system and makes a child more vulnerable to other infectious diseases like pneumonia and diarrhoea, including for months after the measles infection itself among those who survive. Most cases occur in settings that have faced social and economic hardships due to COVID-19, conflict, or other crises, and have chronically weak health system infrastructure and insecurity.

“Measles is more than a dangerous and potentially deadly disease. It is also an early indication that there are gaps in our global immunization coverage, gaps vulnerable children cannot afford,” said Catherine Russell, UNICEF Executive Director. “It is encouraging that people in many communities are beginning to feel protected enough from COVID-19 to return to more social activities. But doing so in places where children are not receiving routine vaccination creates the perfect storm for the spread of a disease like measles.”

In 2020, 23 million children missed out on basic childhood vaccines through routine health services, the highest number since 2009 and 3.7 million more than in 2019.

Top 5 countries with reported measles cases in the last 12 months, until April 2022 ¹				
Country	Reported Measles cases	Rate per million cases	First dose measles coverage (%), 2019 ²	First dose measles coverage (%), 2020 ³
Somalia	9,068	554	46	46
Yemen	3,629	119	67	68
Afghanistan	3,628	91	64	66
Nigeria	12341	58	54	54
Ethiopia	3039	26	60	58

As of April 2022, the agencies report 21 large and disruptive measles outbreaks around the world in the last 12 months. Most of the measles cases were reported in Africa and the East Mediterranean region. The figures are likely higher as the pandemic has

¹ Source: Provisional data based on monthly data reported to WHO as of April 2022

² Source: WHO/UNICEF estimates of national immunization coverage, 2020 revision.

³ Source: WHO/UNICEF estimates of national immunization coverage, 2020 revision.

disrupted surveillance systems globally, with potential underreporting.

Countries with the largest measles outbreaks since the past year include Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia. Insufficient measles vaccine coverage is the major reason for outbreaks, wherever they occur.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted immunization services, health systems have been overwhelmed, and we are now seeing a resurgence of deadly diseases including measles. For many other diseases, the impact of these disruptions to immunization services will be felt for decades to come,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization. “Now is the moment to get essential immunization back on track and launch catch-up campaigns so that everybody can have access to these life-saving vaccines.”

As of 1 April 2022, 57 vaccine-preventable disease campaigns in 43 countries that were scheduled to take place since the start of the pandemic are still postponed, impacting 203 million people, most of whom are children. Of these, 19 are measles campaigns, which put 73 million children at risk of measles due to missed vaccinations. In Ukraine, the measles catch-up campaign of 2019 was interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic and thereafter due to the war. Routine and catch-up campaigns are needed wherever access is possible to help make sure there are not repeated outbreaks as in 2017-2019, when there were over 115,000 cases of measles and 41 deaths in the country – this was the highest incidence in Europe.

Coverage at or above 95 per cent with two doses of the safe and effective measles vaccine can protect children against measles. However, COVID-19 pandemic-related disruptions have delayed the introduction of the second dose of the measles vaccine in many countries.

As countries work to respond to outbreaks of measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases, and recover lost ground, UNICEF and WHO, along with partners such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the partners of the Measles & Rubella Initiative (M&RI), Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and others are supporting efforts to strengthen immunization systems by:

- Restoring services and vaccination campaigns so countries can safely deliver routine immunization programmes to fill the gaps left by the backsliding;

- Helping health workers and community leaders communicate actively with caregivers to explain the importance of vaccinations;
- Rectifying gaps in immunization coverage, including identifying communities and people who have been missed during the pandemic;
- Ensuring that COVID-19 vaccine delivery is independently financed and well-integrated into overall planning for immunization services so that it is not carried out at the cost of childhood and other vaccination services;
- Implementing country plans to prevent and respond to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases and strengthening immunization systems as part of COVID-19 recovery efforts.

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Download UNICEF photos and broll [here](#). Download [WHO photos](#)

For more information on the 24-30 April [WHO World Immunization Week campaign](#) and all [resources](#).

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone. For more information about UNICEF and its work for children, visit www.unicef.org.

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About WHO

The World Health Organization provides global leadership in public health within the United Nations system. Founded in 1948, WHO works with 194 Member States across six regions, to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable. Our goal for 2019-2023 is to ensure that a billion more people have universal health coverage, to protect a billion more people from health emergencies, and provide a further billion people with better health and well-being.

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GLOBAL POLIO ERADICATION INITIATIVE CALLS FOR RENEWED COMMITMENTS TO ACHIEVE PROMISE OF A POLIO-FREE WORLD

US\$4.8 billion budget needed to implement new strategy and eradicate the infectious disease

Germany announces it will co-host polio pledging moment in 2022

GENEVA, 27 April 2022 – Today, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) announced that it is seeking new commitments to fund its [2022-2026 Strategy](#) at a virtual event to launch its investment case. The strategy, if fully funded, will see the vaccination of 370 million children annually for the next five years and the continuation of global surveillance activities for polio and other diseases in 50 countries.

During the virtual launch, the Government of Germany, which holds the G7 presidency in 2022, announced that the country will co-host the pledging moment for the GPEI Strategy during the 2022 World Health Summit in October.

“A strong and fully funded polio programme will benefit health systems around the world. That is why it is so crucial that all stakeholders now commit to ensuring that the new eradication strategy can be implemented in full,” said Niels Annen, Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany. “The polio pledging moment at the World Health Summit this October is a critical opportunity for donors and partners to reiterate their support for a polio-free world. We can only succeed if we make polio eradication our shared priority.”

Wild poliovirus cases are at a historic low and the disease is endemic in just Pakistan and Afghanistan, presenting a unique opportunity to interrupt transmission. However, recent developments, due in part to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the fragility of this progress. In February 2022, [Malawi confirmed its first case of wild polio in three decades](#) and the first on the African continent since 2016, linked to virus originating in Pakistan, and in April 2022 Pakistan recorded its first wild polio case since January 2021. Meanwhile, outbreaks of [cVDPV](#), variants of the poliovirus that can emerge in

under-immunized communities, were recently detected in Israel and Ukraine and circulate in several countries in Africa and Asia.

The investment case outlines new modelling that shows achieving eradication could save an estimated US \$33.1 billion this century, compared to the price of controlling polio outbreaks. At the launch event, GPEI leaders and polio-affected countries urged renewed political and financial support to end polio and protect children and future generations from the paralysis it causes.

“Despite enormous progress, polio still paralyses far too many children around the world – and even one child is too many,” said UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell. “We simply cannot allow another child to suffer from this devastating disease – not when we know how to prevent it. Not when we are so close. We must do whatever it takes to finish the fight – and achieve a polio-free world for every child.”

“The re-emergence of polio in Malawi after three decades was a tragic reminder that until polio is wiped off the face of the earth, it can spread globally and harm children anywhere. I urge all countries to unite behind the Global Polio Eradication Initiative and ensure it has the support and resources it needs to end polio for everyone everywhere,” said Hon. Khumbize Kandodo Chiponda MP, Minister of Health, Malawi.

The new eradication strategy centres on integrating polio activities with other essential health programs in affected countries, better reaching children in the highest risk communities who have never been vaccinated, and strengthening engagement with local leaders and influencers to build trust and vaccine acceptance.

“The children of Pakistan and Afghanistan deserve to live a life free of an incurable, paralyzing disease. With continued global support, we can make polio a disease of the past,” said Dr Shahzad Baig, National Coordinator, Pakistan Polio Eradication Programme. “The polio programme is also working to increase overall health equity in the highest-risk communities by addressing area needs holistically, including by strengthening routine immunization, improving health facilities, and organizing health camps.”

The investment case outlines how support for eradication efforts will enable essential health services in under-served communities and strengthen the world’s defences against future health threats.

Since 2020, GPEI infrastructure and staff have provided critical support to governments as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including by promoting COVID-safe practices, leveraging polio surveillance and lab networks to detect the virus, and assisting COVID-19 vaccination efforts through health worker trainings, community mobilization, data management and other activities.

“The global effort to consign polio to the history books will not only help to spare future generations from this devastating disease, but serve to strengthen health systems and health security,” said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General.

Additional quotes from the GPEI Investment Case:

“We have the knowledge and tools to wipe polio off the face of the earth. GPEI needs the resources to take us the last mile to eradicating this awful disease. Investing in GPEI will also help us detect and respond to other health emergencies. We can’t waver now. Let’s all take this opportunity to fully support GPEI, and create a world in which no child is paralyzed by polio ever again,” said Bill Gates, Co-chair, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

“An investment in polio eradication goes further than fighting one disease. It is the ultimate investment in both equity and sustainability – it is for everyone and forever. An important component of GPEI’s Strategy focuses on integrating the planning and coordination of polio activities and essential health services to reach zero-dose children who have never been immunized with routine vaccines, therefore contributing to the goals of the Immunization Agenda 2030.” said Seth Berkley, Chief Executive Officer, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

“Twenty million people are walking today because of polio vaccination, and we have learned, improved and innovated along the way. We are stronger and more resilient as we enter the last lap of this marathon to protect all future generations of the world’s children from polio. Please join us; with our will and our collective resources, we can seize the unprecedented opportunity to cross the finish line that lies before us,” said Mike McGovern, Chair, International PolioPlus Committee, Rotary International.

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Note for editors:

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative is a public-private partnership led by national governments with six core partners – Rotary International, the World Health Organization (WHO), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), UNICEF, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. For more information on the global effort to end polio, visit polioeradication.org