

Progress being made in malaria control globally: WHO

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Every year vaccination averts 2 to 3 million infant deaths globally from deadly diseases such as diphtheria, hepatitis B, measles, mumps, pertussis, polio and tetanus.

Vaccines save lives, but 1 in 5 children, an estimated 21.8 million infants worldwide still miss out on basic vaccines.

Of them, 9 million infants, more than one-third, live in WHO's South-East Asia Region.

Of the 40 million children born in the South-East Asia region every year, only about 75 percent get all three doses of diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus vaccines.

"Children miss out on measles vaccines. In 2013 about 26 percent of the global measles deaths, almost 38,000 occurred in countries in the South-East Asia region, 27,500 in India alone," revealed Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, regional director, WHO South-East Asia.

These grim statistics underscore the need to intensify efforts to protect children with lifesaving vaccines.

"We must close these immunization gaps. We must emulate lessons learnt from major public health wins, especially the polio eradication programme, to reach the unreached - the underserved children living in remote areas and in deprived urban and other settings - to ensure equity with routine immunization vaccines," she added.

"To increase and sustain vaccination coverage, we need to strengthen health systems and link vaccine delivery to other health interventions," Dr Poonam said.

Addressing the resource crunch, competing health priorities, poor management of health systems, inadequate monitoring and supervision and low awareness level among parents is critical to making vaccination available to all children.

Vaccination is a known cost-effective health intervention.

"Increasing vaccination coverage will accelerate control of vaccine preventable diseases and reduce death and diseases among children," voiced Dr Poonam.

She continued, "Vaccination is also a shared responsibility. Collective efforts are needed by government, partner agencies, health professionals, academia, civil society, media, private sector and the community itself. And all of the above should be steered by continued strong political commitment and backed with resources."

With concerted efforts, WHO South-East Asia aims at maternal and neonatal tetanus elimination this year, measles elimination and rubella and congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) control by 2020; sustaining the victory over polio until the disease is eradicated globally; increasing immunization coverage to >90 percent at the national level and to >80 percent at the district level with the three doses of diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus vaccines.

WHO believes that every child has the right to lead a healthy life, and vaccination is a vital step.

The World Immunization Week this year focuses on closing the immunization gap and reaching equity in immunization levels with renewed efforts.