

WHO and partners call for urgent action on meningitis

New meningitis strategy aims to save more than 200,000 lives annually

GENEVA, 28 September 2021 – Today, the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners launched the first ever global strategy to defeat meningitis - a debilitating disease that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year.

By 2030, the goals are to eliminate epidemics of bacterial meningitis – the most deadly form of the disease – and to reduce deaths by 70% and halve the number of cases. The organizations estimate that in total, the strategy could save more than 200,000 lives annually and significantly reduce disability caused by the disease.

This strategy, the Global Roadmap to Defeat Meningitis by 2030, was launched by a broad coalition of partners involved in meningitis prevention and control at a virtual event, hosted by WHO in Geneva. Its focus is on preventing infections and improving care and diagnosis for those affected.

“Wherever it occurs, meningitis can be deadly and debilitating; it strikes quickly, has serious health, economic and social consequences, and causes devastating outbreaks,” said **Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General**. “It is time to tackle meningitis globally once and for all –by urgently expanding access to existing tools like vaccines, spearheading new research and innovation to prevent, detecting and treating the various causes of the disease, and improving rehabilitation for those affected.”

Meningitis is a dangerous inflammation of the membranes that surround the brain and spinal cord, predominantly caused by infection with bacteria and viruses.

Meningitis that is caused by bacterial infection tends to be the most serious – leading to around 250,000 deaths a year - and can cause fast-spreading epidemics. It kills 1 in 10 of those infected – mostly children and young people - and leaves 1 in 5 with long-lasting disability, such as seizures, hearing and vision loss, neurological damage, and cognitive impairment.

Over the last ten years, meningitis epidemics have occurred in all regions of the world, though most commonly in the ‘Meningitis Belt,’ which spans 26 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa. These epidemics are unpredictable, can severely disrupt health systems, and create poverty - generating catastrophic expenditures for households and communities.

“More than half a billion Africans are at risk of seasonal meningitis outbreaks but the disease has been off the radar for too long,” said **Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa**. “This shift away from firefighting outbreaks to strategic response can’t come soon enough. This roadmap will help protect the

health and lives of hundreds of thousands of families who every year fear this disease.”

Several vaccines protect against meningitis, including meningococcal, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b and pneumococcal vaccines. However, not all communities have access to these lifesaving vaccines, and many countries are yet to introduce them into their national programmes.

While research is underway to develop vaccines for other causes of meningitis, such as Group B Strep bacteria, there remains an urgent need for innovation, funding and research to develop more meningitis-preventive vaccines. Efforts are also needed to strengthen early diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation for all those who need it after contracting the disease.

“This roadmap is the embodiment of the ambition of people and families affected around the world who have called for its creation. It’s their experience and passion that has driven a whole community of interest to get this far,” said **Vinny Smith, Chief Executive Officer of the Meningitis Research Foundation and the Confederation of Meningitis Organisations (CoMO)**, an international membership organization of patient advocacy groups for meningitis. “We celebrate together the common goal of defeating meningitis and will be led by their inspiration to make it happen.”

The new Roadmap details the following priorities for meningitis response and prevention:

- Achievement of high immunization coverage, development of new affordable vaccines, and improved prevention strategies and outbreak response;
- Speedy diagnosis and optimal treatment for patients;
- Good data to guide prevention and control efforts;
- Care and support for those affected, focusing on early recognition and improved access to care and support for after-effects, and
- Advocacy and engagement, to ensure high awareness of meningitis, accountability for national plans, and affirmation of the right to prevention, care and after-care services.

WHO and partners are providing support to countries to implement the Roadmap, including through the development of regional and national frameworks that will help countries achieve its ambitious goals.

Partner quotes

“The Global Roadmap to Defeat Meningitis demonstrates what can be accomplished when a global need is met with global action,” said **Nikolaj Gilbert, President and CEO of PATH**. “Progress against meningitis has lagged for too long; by working together, we can overcome the disease that has cost so many lives in countries around the world. PATH is proud to have been a part of the roadmap’s development and is committed to advancing affordable and equitable vaccine solutions to defeat meningitis.”

“We must be united in our efforts to end all preventable childhood diseases, including bacterial meningitis,” says **Dr. Aboubacar Kampo, Director of Health Programmes at UNICEF**. “UNICEF has been supporting governments for decades, facilitating the delivery of life-saving meningitis vaccines. Still, far too many children are succumbing to this and other preventable diseases – and the situation is only worsening as a result of the pandemic. We need to act decisively to strengthen primary health care and get routine immunization back on track, before more children face adverse health outcomes – or loss of life - inflicted by meningitis and other preventable infectious diseases.”

“Although the main burden of meningitis is in poor countries, acute bacterial meningitis is a global problem with no country being spared its devastating impact,” said **Professor Sir Brian Greenwood, Professor of Clinical Tropical Medicine at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine** and co-chair of the Task Force supporting the implementation of the roadmap. “Thus, containing this serious group of infections needs a global response. This is what the roadmap sets out to achieve, bringing together – under the umbrella of WHO – health professionals from across the world to bring this condition under control by 2030.”

“The Meningitis Roadmap provides a clear blueprint for defeating this devastating disease,” said **Professor Robert Heyderman, Head of the Research Department of Infection at University College London**. “Crucially it identifies the gaps in our knowledge and the tools required. To achieve the Road Map’s ambitious goals, a team approach will bring together countries, global policymakers, civil society, funders, researchers, public health specialists, healthcare workers and industry to generate and implement innovative new strategies.”

Notes

Today’s launch event was supported by a large network of organizations and individual experts involved in meningitis prevention and control, including the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Médecins Sans Frontières, Epicentre, the Meningitis Research Foundation, PATH, UNICEF, the Gates Foundation and CoMO. Additional acknowledgements go to all partners involved in the development of the Roadmap.

The Roadmap is the result of the first ever resolution on meningitis, passed by the World Health Assembly and endorsed unanimously by WHO member states in 2020.

As one of the first tangible outputs from this Roadmap, WHO and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine will be launching a global evidence-based report on November 3rd about identifying and preventing deaths due to Group B strep, also known as streptococcal bacteria, the major cause of neonatal and infant meningitis.

More information

<https://www.who.int/news-room/events/detail/2021/09/28/default-calendar/launch-of-the-defeating-meningitis-roadmap>

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/meningococcal-meningitis>

<https://www.who.int/health-topics/meningitis>

<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/defeating-meningitis-by-2030-a-global-road-map>

<https://www.afro.who.int/news/democratic-republic-congo-declares-meningitis-outbreak-north-eastern-province-0>

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