

10 July 2017 – With increasing numbers of people in some countries of the World Health Organization’s Eastern Mediterranean Region affected by acute watery diarrhoea and cholera, WHO in the Region is working with partners, including UNICEF, to save lives in areas where outbreaks are active, and reduce the risk of these diseases crossing into unaffected areas and neighbouring countries.

“The situation has reached a critical point. The number of people with acute watery diarrhoea/cholera in countries in the Region in 2017 alone is higher than the number of people affected worldwide in 2016. Infectious diseases know no borders, and can quickly spread if they are not effectively contained. As the numbers of cases grow day by day, it is imperative that we exert all efforts to make sure populations in cholera-endemic countries and neighbouring countries are protected,” said Dr Mahmoud Fikri, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Population movement is increasing the risk of epidemic-prone diseases crossing into unaffected areas. In Somalia, the cholera outbreak has spread to the northern region, which had previously been cholera-free for more than 10 years. In Sudan, cases of acute watery diarrhoea have appeared for the first time in camps hosting internally displaced Sudanese in Darfur. Increasing numbers of people are expected to be affected during the current high season for transmission of waterborne disease due to deteriorating humanitarian conditions and lack of access to safe water and sanitation. Acute watery diarrhoea/cholera are easily treatable, but can be life-threatening without immediate medical care. National health authorities in affected countries, supported by WHO and partners, are responding to the current outbreaks through disease surveillance for the early detection of cases, improving case management and infection control through the establishment of treatment centres, improving and monitoring water quality, providing medicines and supplies, introducing the oral cholera vaccine, and promoting safe hygiene practices in communities.

WHO and UNICEF co-hosted a sub-regional meeting region from 8 to 9 July 2017 in Beirut, Lebanon, on scaling up preparedness and response to acute watery diarrhoea/cholera in the Region. The meeting was attended by health officials from affected and neighbouring countries, as well as key partners involved in the health response.

A regional roadmap was developed during the meeting focusing on the areas of (a) strengthening coordination at sub-national level; (b) enhancing integrated, multi-sector rapid response teams in affected areas; (c) decentralising and expanding laboratory testing; (d)

reinforcing guidelines for case management and infection prevention and control; (e) scaling up water and sanitation activities at household level; and (f) enhancing risk communications at community level.

In line with the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005), WHO will also work closely with neighbouring countries to reinforce disease surveillance, laboratory and preparedness capacity, including at Points of Entry, to rapidly detect potential cases and ensure that all suspected acute watery diarrhoea/cholera cases are referred to appropriate health facilities.

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