

Kabul 12 March 2018

Today the Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan, together with UNICEF and WHO, is launching the first national campaign for polio eradication in 2018.

Over the next five days, around 9.9 million children under the age of five will be vaccinated against polio in all provinces of Afghanistan and more than 8.9 million children aged between 6 months to 5 years will be given Vitamin A during the campaign that continues until 16 March.

Vitamin A supplementation helps maintain strong immune systems. It reduces the incidences of diarrhoea and measles in children and prevents blindness and hearing loss. Most importantly, Vitamin A supplements can improve a child's chance of survival by 12 to 24 per cent.

Speaking at the inauguration, The Minister of Public Health H.E. Dr. Ferozuddin Feroz said: "The poliovirus is now fighting for survival in fewer and fewer focused areas. We are no longer seeing those maps with dots of polioviruses scattered everywhere, which gives us hope that we are nearing our goal of ending this disease. 98% of Afghanistan is in fact polio-free, which is a tremendous achievement for a country facing enormous and complex challenges."

The polio vaccine is safe and effective and has no side effects. It is critical to vaccinate all children under 5 across the country in order to stop the virus, including all sick children and newborns, whose immunity is weak against this disease.

"The first national vaccination campaign in 2018 is an important opportunity for us," said the WHO Representative for Afghanistan, Dr Richard Peepkorn. "Although high levels of population immunity against polio have been achieved across the country, the virus is still circulating in the Eastern and Southern Regions, which is why we have stepped up efforts to ensure we reach every child with vaccinations irrespective of where they live. Children on the move, whether they are displaced or nomadic people, are of special concern to us. As Afghanistan is closer than ever to eradicating the disease, we strive to give our best."

This national campaign will be carried out by around 70,000 dedicated polio workers who will go house to house in their communities to vaccinate children. Polio teams will also revisit households where children were missed the first time the vaccinators visited to ensure that all children are vaccinated and protected.

UNICEF Representative Adele Khodr appealed to all parents and caregivers across Afghanistan to protect their children from polio paralysis and grasp this historic opportunity to end the disease. “We have never been so close to ending polio,” Ms Khodr said. “I call on all parents across Afghanistan to make sure their children are vaccinated against polio this week to give them a healthy, active start to their life and to safeguard them against this virus. Our hope is that Afghanistan will quickly end this disease and give the gift of a polio-free world to all future generations.”

Polio vaccines have been strongly endorsed by prominent local and international Islamic scholars.

So far in 2018, Afghanistan has seen three cases of polio - one in Nangarhar and two in Kandahar province.

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