

27 November 2021 – Pakistan is conducting a measles and rubella campaign to vaccinate more than 90 million children aged between 9 months and 15 years against the deadly measles and rubella viruses. The nationwide campaign is one of the largest in history in spite of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to reach over 95% coverage. Oral polio vaccine will also be integrated in the campaign to vaccinate children under 5 to support polio eradication efforts in Pakistan.

More than 386 000 health professionals, including 76 000 vaccinators and more than 143 000 social mobilizers, are being mobilized in the WHO/UNICEF/Gavi-supported campaign, which will be conducted in public and private health facilities, outreach centres and educational facilities from 15 to 27 November. Nearly half of the children to be immunized are enrolled in schools.

The campaign is timely, as more than 17 000 suspected measles and rubella cases were reported in Pakistan in 2021, which is double the number of cases reported in 2020. This marks a sharp increase in reported cases and has resulted in an increase in measles outbreaks; 70 districts in the country reported outbreaks and 51 children have died from complications from the outbreaks so far. An increase in congenital rubella syndrome cases was also recorded in 2020 and 2021 – 70% of children affected suffer from congenital heart disease, and 30% from congenital cataract.

The measles virus remains one of the leading causes of death among young children globally. It is one of the world's most contagious human viruses, but it can be almost entirely prevented through vaccination. The rubella virus, considered the most common cause of preventable congenital birth defects, can also be prevented through vaccination.

“The measles and rubella campaign will move us not only one step closer to maintaining measles elimination and accelerating rubella control, but also a step closer to reducing child mortality across Pakistan. Every child has the right to access life-saving health care,” said Dr Palitha Mahipala, WHO Representative in Pakistan. “WHO is partnering with the Government of Pakistan and supports all efforts to ensure that all children are vaccinated against measles and rubella. The nationwide campaign will help to stop the current measles outbreak and WHO acknowledges the strong political commitment of the Government in eliminating measles benefit of Pakistan's children.”

Measles outbreaks occur when people who are not protected from the virus are infected and spread the disease to unvaccinated or under-vaccinated populations. To control measles and prevent outbreaks and deaths, vaccination coverage rates must reach 95% – the target of the campaign. Since 2000, measles vaccination is estimated to have saved more than 23 million lives globally.

Pakistan has demonstrated consistent strong political, as well as administrative, commitment towards strengthening and restoring immunization services across the country over the past years, with promising results. Targeting ‘zero-dose’ children, many born during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a priority to help ensure that vaccination is equitable for every child.

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