

Why is immunization important?

Immunization is one of the most successful and effective health interventions. This health intervention has reduced morbidity and mortality across the world in a safe and cost-effective manner. Immunization is an important investment for all countries. From infants to senior citizens, immunization prevents debilitating illness, disability and death from vaccine-preventable diseases. When vaccines are combined with other health interventions, such as vitamin A supplementation to boost children's immune systems, provision of deworming medicine, growth-monitoring, and distribution of insecticide-treated nets to prevent malaria, immunization becomes a major force for child survival. In addition, the benefits of immunization are increasingly being extended to adolescents and adults, providing protection against life-threatening diseases, such as influenza, meningitis and cancers that occur in adulthood.

Where does regional immunization now stand?

The WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region has experienced significant success in reducing morbidity and mortality due to vaccine-preventable diseases. Vaccination coverage with three doses of diphtheria–tetanus–pertussis (DTP3) has increased to 91%, up from 18% in 1980. Significant achievements also include reaching the 90% measles mortality reduction target three years ahead of schedule; maintaining polio-free status in 20 countries; strengthening surveillance networks and national decision-making processes to introduce new vaccines; and organizing Vaccination Week, an annual advocacy, education and communication initiative which celebrates and promotes the value of immunization.

What regional challenges face immunization today?

Despite extraordinary progress in immunizing more children over the past decade in the Region, an estimated 1.5 million infants did not receive their third dose of DPT by their first birthday in 2010. In addition, the Region continues to face daunting challenges, such as the interruption of polio transmission from Afghanistan and Pakistan, and elimination of measles and maternal and neonatal tetanus. Moreover, the majority of the vaccine-preventable disease-related deaths are due to pneumococcal disease and rotavirus diarrhoea, some of which can be prevented through vaccination with newly-available vaccines.

What is Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean?

Responding to the remarkable opportunities, such as introduction of new vaccines into national immunization programmes, and to the daunting challenges, such as reaching the 1.5 million unimmunized infants will in part require combined and innovative advocacy, education and communication solutions. Accordingly, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean and partners are launching Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean which is an annual

Region-wide initiative celebrating and promoting the value of immunization. It provides a unique opportunity to revive the Region's commitment towards immunization. With the slogan Vaccination...the obvious choice, the objectives of the initiative are to increase stakeholder awareness of the value of immunization; promote and maintain immunization as a priority for policy and decision-makers; advocate for and mobilize human and financial resources; and improve access to immunization for high-risk populations and hard-to-reach areas in the Region.

What is the focus of 2012 Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean?

With much-anticipated participation from the Region's 22 countries, the third Vaccination Week will be from 24 to 30 April 2012. The success of the previous vaccination weeks was largely due to their flexibility, as countries designated their objectives based on competing priorities and evidence. Each year, the Regional Office, in consultation with countries and partners, suggests overarching themes demonstrating the same level of flexibility that assures both regional relevance and national focus. For 2012 Vaccination Week, it is suggested that the Region and countries adopt the theme of "reaching every community" which reflects the programme's vision and strategy in addressing immunization priorities and opportunities. This event can be leveraged to bridge immunization gaps, introduce and expand the use of new vaccines, prevent and respond to vaccine-preventable diseases in outbreaks and humanitarian crises, and achieve regional and national goals for accelerated disease control, elimination and eradication.

A variety of activities are proposed during the week including concerts, workshops, training sessions, social mobilization, round tables, exhibitions and media events addressing a wide range of vaccine-related issues. In addition, vaccination services such as tracking of unvaccinated people, implementing large-scale vaccination campaigns and using Child Health Days to deliver an integrated package of life-saving health interventions will be planned. The target audiences for various activities include parents or caregivers, academia, health workers, media, decision-makers, private sector and stakeholders.

Who is involved in the Vaccination Week initiative?

The WHO Regional Office coordinates and provides technical support to national health authorities to plan and implement relevant health promotion activities according to their priorities and current epidemiologic evidence. UNICEF and other in-country partners also provide invaluable technical and financial support throughout the planning and implementation of the initiative.

Do other regions have vaccination weeks?

In 2012, we anticipate all WHO Regions to join the first World Immunization Week.

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