



16 November 2023, Sana'a, Yemen – Reports of diphtheria cases in Yemen (to 14 October 2023) are 57% higher than in 2021 and 2022. Cases have risen gradually since 2021, with a significant increase noted in 2023.

So far this year, 1671 suspected diphtheria cases have been reported in the country, with 109 associated deaths, compared with 1283 cases reported in the whole of 2022. Diphtheria is typically a winter illness, so the increase in cases noted from June to September 2023 marks a change from the usual seasonal pattern.

In response to the current increase in cases, WHO is working to supply Yemen's Ministry of Public Health and Population with an urgent quantity of 2200 vials of diphtheria antitoxin, which will be distributed to the most affected areas. Due to the complexities of the Yemen situation, however, only 220 vials have been delivered to date, whereas the global shortage of diphtheria antitoxin affects its availability and increases prices.

“The 2200 doses that WHO has secured are only enough to treat 300 severe patients, which is inadequate to address the issue,” said Dr Arturo Pesigan, WHO Representative in Yemen. “It is projected that in 2024 multiple ongoing and growing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases – including diphtheria – will persist, with the proportion of unvaccinated, or zero-dose, children reaching 28%. The funding shortage and issues of inaccessibility are affecting the health and lives of vulnerable people in Yemen.”

Among children in Yemen, there has been a significant drop in immunization rates and a correlated increase in cases of vaccine-preventable diseases. This decline in coverage continues to worsen owing to economic deterioration, low incomes, displacement, and overcrowded living conditions in camps, coupled with an overstretched health system and chronic funding shortage. Millions of children cannot be reached by routine immunization activities, and suspected cases of vaccine-preventable diseases have risen to unprecedented levels.

WHO continues to monitor and analyse outbreak trends and reported cases on a weekly basis, to ensure a full understanding of the epidemiological situation for various circulating outbreaks.

About diphtheria

Diphtheria is an infection caused by the bacterium *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. Signs and symptoms range from mild to severe and often come on gradually, with a higher mortality rate among unvaccinated younger children. In severe cases, the bacteria produce a poison (toxin) that causes a thick grey or white patch at the back of the throat that can block the airway, making it hard to breathe or swallow.

The toxin may also get into the bloodstream, causing complications that may include inflammation and damage of the heart muscle, inflammation of nerves, kidney problems and bleeding problems. The damaged heart muscle may result in an abnormal heart rate and inflammation of the nerves may result in paralysis.

For more information on Yemen's health situation, visit: [Yemen Health Emergency](#)

For more information on diphtheria, visit: [Diphtheria Questions and Answers](#)

Media contacts: WHO Yemen Communications, mediayemen@who.int

About WHO

Since 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been the United Nations agency dedicated to advancing health for all, so that everyone, everywhere can attain the highest level of health. WHO leads global efforts to expand universal health coverage, direct and coordinate the world's responses to health emergencies and connect nations, partners and people to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable.

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