24 April 2024, Cairo, Egypt – World Immunization Week this year coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI). Such has been the programme's remarkable impact on global health that the "E" in EPI today stands for "Essential".

Since 1974, this WHO initiative has inspired countries to use vaccines to do everything **humanly possible** to safeguard the health and well-being of all children everywhere.

Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, emphasized the importance of equitable access to vaccines: "EPI has been instrumental in saving millions of lives worldwide, by providing children with WHO-recommended essential vaccines for vaccine-preventable diseases. I urge governments, donors and other partners to focus on ensuring equitable access for all to these life-saving vaccines."

Thanks to EPI, countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region have made remarkable progress in introducing new vaccines and reaching more children through vaccination campaigns. This is despite the conflicts, disasters and other emergencies that have beset the Region. An estimated 25 million cumulative deaths have been averted by EPI vaccination in the Region, leading to a net gain of 1.5 billion cumulative years of full health over the past 50 years.

EPI began in 1974 with a schedule of vaccines for 6 diseases; today, the schedule offers protection against 13 vaccine-preventable diseases.

Every country and territory of the Region has now implemented hepatitis B and Hib vaccines (pentavalent vaccines). Two thirds of children in the Region have access to pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccines. So far, 17 countries have eradicated maternal and neonatal tetanus, and 4 have eliminated measles and rubella. Since 2000, measles vaccination alone has prevented more than 9 million deaths in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

WHO, in collaboration with partners, is working tirelessly to reach millions of children to ensure that they receive the life-saving vaccines they need. "Together, we can extend immunization's

life-saving benefits to every corner of the Eastern Mediterranean Region – ensuring a long life for all," stressed Dr Balkhy.

Ongoing investment in immunization infrastructure is of equal importance. This World Immunization Week, WHO calls on all governments, policy-makers and stakeholders to recommit to invest in robust immunization systems that can reach every child and community.

"Our journey will not end here," added Dr Balkhy. "As we reflect on the milestones of the past, we also look forward with renewed determination. Join us in honouring the Expanded Programme on Immunization's 50th anniversary and recognizing the transformative power of vaccines."

Notes to editors:

The Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), an initiative launched by WHO in 1974, is a global endeavour to ensure equitable access to life-saving vaccines for every child, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status. Over the past 5 decades, EPI has evolved and achieved remarkable milestones that have reshaped the global health landscape.

The 50th anniversary of EPI in 2024 is a pivotal moment to celebrate the programme's achievements, highlight its impact in terms of lives saved, and catalyse renewed efforts to strengthen routine immunization activities.

Read more about the 50th anniversary of EPI .

Related links

Essential Programme on Immunization

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