



Milestone: COVID-19 five years ago

30 December 2024 - Worldwide, there were an estimated 10.3 million cases of measles in 2023, a 20% increase from 2022, according to new estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Inadequate immunization coverage globally is driving the surge in cases.

Measles is preventable with two doses of measles vaccine; yet more than 22 million children missed their first dose of measles vaccine in 2023. Globally, an estimated 83% of children received their first dose of measles vaccine last year, while only 74% received the recommended second dose.

Coverage of 95% or greater of two doses of measles vaccine is needed in each country and community to prevent outbreaks and protect populations from one of the world's most contagious human viruses.

"Measles vaccine has saved more lives than any other vaccine in the past 50 years," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "To save even more lives and stop this deadly virus from harming the most vulnerable, we must invest in immunization for every person, no matter where they live."

"The number of measles infections are rising around the globe, endangering lives and health," CDC Director Mandy Cohen said. "The measles vaccine is our best protection against the virus, and we must continue to invest in efforts to increase access."

As a result of global gaps in vaccination coverage, 57 countries experienced large or disruptive measles outbreaks in 2023, affecting all regions except the Americas, and representing a nearly 60% increase from 36 countries in the previous year. The WHO African, Eastern Mediterranean, European, South-East Asia and Western Pacific regions experienced a substantial upsurge in cases. Nearly half of all large or disruptive outbreaks occurred in the African region.

An unacceptable death toll due to rising measles cases

The new data show that an estimated 107 500 people, mostly children younger than 5 years of age, died due to measles in 2023. Although this is an 8% decrease from the previous year, far too many children are still dying from this preventable disease. This slight reduction in deaths was mainly because the surge in cases occurred in countries and regions where children with measles are less likely to die, due to better nutritional status and access to health services.

Even when people survive measles, serious health effects can occur, some of which are lifelong. Infants and young children are at greatest risk of serious complications from the disease, which include blindness, pneumonia, and encephalitis (an infection causing brain swelling and potentially brain damage).

Five years ago on 31 December 2019, WHO's Country Office in China picked up a media statement by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission from their website on cases of 'viral pneumonia' in Wuhan, China. In the weeks, months and years that unfolded after that, COVID-19 came to shape our lives and our world.

At WHO, we went to work immediately as the new year dawned. WHO employees activated emergency systems on 1 January 2020, and informed the world on 4 January. By 9-12 January, WHO had published its first set of comprehensive guidance for countries, and on 13 January, we brought together partners to publish the blueprint of the first SARS-CoV-2 laboratory test.

All along, we convened experts and ministries of health from around the world, gathered and analysed data, and shared what was reported, what we learned and what it meant for people. Read about WHO's actions in this interactive timeline.

As we mark this milestone, let's take a moment to honour the lives changed and lost, recognize those who are suffering from COVID-19 and long COVID, express gratitude to the health workers who sacrificed so much to care for us, and commit to learning from COVID-19 to build a healthier tomorrow.

We continue to call on China to share data and access so we can understand the origins of COVID-19. This is a moral and scientific imperative. Without transparency, sharing, and cooperation among countries, the world cannot adequately prevent and prepare for future epidemics and pandemics.

As we pose the question, "Is the world better prepared for the next pandemic than we were for COVID-19?" see WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus's response at a recent press conference: <https://who.canto.global/b/SHEJL>

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