Eliminating measles and rubella

Fact sheet: August 2017

Key facts

**Measles** is one of the most contagious and devastating infectious diseases.

In 2013–2016, **measles resurfaced** in the WHO Western Pacific Region after reaching a historic low in 2012.

**Rubella** causes multiple birth defects—including blindness, deafness and heart defects—called **congenital rubella syndrome (CRS)**.

**Several thousand** babies are born with CRS in the Western Pacific Region every year.

**Vaccines and strong immunization programmes** can eliminate measles and rubella and prevent CRS.

**Measles is a highly contagious and serious viral disease.** It can spread rapidly wherever non-immune people gather, even when a high proportion of the overall population is immune. Measles can be fatal. In developing countries, measles infection runs a devastating course and as many as 2-15% of children who are infected die as a result.

In 2005, countries and areas in the Western Pacific decided to eliminate measles in the Region by 2012. In 2012, the Region achieved the lowest rates of measles transmission in its history. However, in 2013–2016, the Western Pacific experienced a **Region-wide measles resurgence**, including multiple outbreaks in countries that had interrupted or nearly interrupted measles transmission.

Rubella is usually a mild viral disease, but infection in a pregnant woman can cause congenital rubella syndrome (CRS), which can be devastating to the unborn baby. Miscarriage or stillbirth can occur, and babies born with CRS can suffer from a range of severe problems, including intellectual disability, blindness, deafness, and heart defects.

Surveillance to track rates of CRS is currently very limited in many countries of the Region, so the total burden of CRS in the Western Pacific is unclear. A study estimated that there were approximately 9000 CRS cases in the Western Pacific in 2010. Recently, the rate of rubella infection among women of reproductive age has been significantly increasing in several countries in the Region, leading to increased risk of CRS.

Stopping the spread of both viruses is the best way to avoid complications and deaths due to measles and rubella and prevent CRS. Efforts to eliminate measles and rubella can be integrated through use of a single vaccine to protect against both diseases and having good systems to detect possible cases. An integrated effort to eliminate measles and rubella at the same time is practical, and offers major benefits for the health of the people of the Region.

**WHO response**

WHO works with Member States to achieve measles and rubella elimination by ensuring that their immunization programmes can deliver two doses of the combined vaccine to prevent measles and rubella to every person who needs it. This includes increasing the number of children reached by routine immunization, and additional immunization activities to reach unvaccinated people. In 2013 to 2016, mass vaccination campaigns vaccinated more than 43 million people in 9 countries of the Region.

WHO also works with countries to strengthen their capacity to detect possible cases of measles and rubella, respond rapidly to prevent further spread, and identify and further protect populations at risk.

A regional strategy and plan of action for measles and rubella elimination in the Western Pacific has been developed through intensive consultation with Member States, experts and partners.