

World Health Organization Urges Countries to Vaccinate Children



A mother holds her baby as he receives a pneumococcal vaccination during a national vaccination campaign in Managua, April 15, 2013.

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The World Health Organization says vaccinations against disease save the lives of two to three million children every year. The WHO says almost 80 percent of babies are vaccinated against diseases like diphtheria, measles and whooping cough. But 20 percent -- or about 22 million children -- are not protected. That is why many efforts to end polio and measles have not succeeded, says WHO Director of Immunization Jean-Marie Okwo-Bele. But Dr. Okwo-Bele also says the cost of newer vaccines is too high for children in poor countries.

“The newer vaccines that are available against the two top killers of children – pneumonia and diarrhea – these vaccines are not accessible to the majority of children in the world. And, we know that child deaths will be reduced by an additional one to one and one half million deaths with increased access to all vaccines.”

The WHO says most of the UN-vaccinated children live in countries in Africa

and Southeast Asia. Eighty percent of those who are *not* vaccinated against preventable diseases live in 10 countries. The list includes Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Indonesia and Pakistan.

Dr. Okwo-Bele says limited resources for health care systems also threaten the ability of poor countries to vaccinate children. For example, some countries are not able to store vaccines at cold temperatures until they can be used. But the official says there are some improvements in getting vaccines to clinics and children.

“In Benin last year, for the first time we used the vaccine, the new vaccine that has been produced for combating meningitis A epidemics in Benin and West Africa. So, we used that vaccine outside the cold chain for up to four days in district and health facility levels. And this is a big step to help with vaccination campaigns, especially in these areas where we do not have a ready cold chain.”

The WHO says governments need to vaccinate more children. The UN organization also says health officials and governments must do a better job of telling people about the benefits of vaccines. Dr. Okwo-Bele says that includes making sure people understand that many stories about vaccines are not true.

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