

WHO Report: Record Decline in Childhood Vaccinations



Official data published this week by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF show the largest sustained decline in childhood vaccinations in approximately 30 years.

The number of children receiving three doses of the vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP3) has decreased by 5 percentage points between 2019 and 2021 to 81%. This means that 25 million children have missed out on one or more doses of DTP in 2021 alone, compared to 2 million in 2020 and 6 million in 2019.

Of this 25 million, 18 million children have not received a single dose of DTP during the year. Most of these children live in low and middle-income countries, including India, Nigeria, Indonesia, Ethiopia and the Philippines. Vaccine coverage has dropped in every region, with East Asia and the Pacific region recording the most declines.

First dose measles coverage dropped to 81% in 2021. This is the lowest level since 2008. Similarly, compared to 2019, 6.7 million more children missed the third dose of the polio vaccine, and 3.5 million missed the first dose of the HPV vaccine. Over a quarter of the coverage of HPV vaccines achieved in 2019 has been lost. This can have a negative impact on the health of girls and women. Global coverage of the first dose of HPV vaccine is only 15%, even though the vaccine was licensed over 15 years ago.

Catherine Russell, UNICEF Executive Director, highlights this as an issue of concern as this sustained drop in immunisation could have severe consequences. She also emphasised that COVID-19 disruption and lockdowns cannot be used as an excuse and that if immunisation levels were not brought back on track, there would be more outbreaks, more sick children and more pressure on already strained healthcare systems.

The decline in immunisation rates is accompanied by rapidly increasing rates of severe acute malnutrition. Children who are malnourished have weaker immune systems. Any missed vaccinations could make common childhood illnesses lethal to them. Hence, hunger and an immunisation gap can create a child survival crisis.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, says that tackling COVID-19 needs to go hand in hand with vaccinating children for killer diseases like measles, pneumonia and diarrhoea. "It's not a question of either/or; it's possible to do both", he says.

Source: [World Health Organization](#)

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