

Are vaccine-preventable diseases rising? | Explained

What has WHO, UNICEF and Gavi warned? Why are vaccination schedules being missed? Why is there a threat to immunisation efforts? What are world leaders being advised to do? What happened during the pandemic? What is the status in India?

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Secure future: Pulse polio drops administered to a child in Palakkad as part of the vaccination programme in Kerala in 2024. | Photo Credit: K.K. Mustafah

The story so far: Diseases that can be prevented through vaccination, such as measles, meningitis, and yellow fever, are re-emerging, world health leaders have warned, because millions of children are missing vaccinations due to funding cuts and disruption in immunisation programmes. The World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF and Gavi have issued a joint warning stating that immunisation efforts are also being threatened by widespread misinformation, population growth and humanitarian crises. They urged leaders around the world to strengthen vaccination programmes and give the issue their “urgent and sustained political attention.”

What set alarm bells ringing?

A recent WHO rapid stock take with 108 of its country offices mostly in low- and lower-middle-income countries showed that nearly half of those countries are facing moderate to severe disruptions in vaccination campaigns, routine immunisation, and access to supplies due to reduced donor funding. Disease surveillance, including for vaccine-preventable diseases, has also been impacted in more than half the countries surveyed.

At the same time, the number of children missing routine vaccinations has been increasing, even as countries try to catch up with vaccinations for children to make up for the lost pandemic years. In 2023, an estimated 14.5 million children missed all their routine vaccine doses — up from 13.9 million in 2022 and 12.9 million in 2019. Over half of these children live in countries facing conflict, fragility, or instability, where access to basic health services is often disrupted. Even in the U.S., there is a measles outbreak. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has confirmed that as of May 1, the measles case count is 935, more than triple the number seen in 2024. It had been considered eliminated from the U.S. since 2000.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said funding cuts to global health have put hard-won gains in jeopardy. “Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases are increasing around the world, putting lives at risk and exposing countries to increased costs in treating diseases and responding to outbreaks. Countries with limited resources must invest in the highest-impact interventions — and that includes vaccines,” he said. “The global funding crisis is severely limiting our ability to vaccinate over 15 million vulnerable children in fragile and conflict-affected

countries against measles,” said UNICEF executive director Catherine Russell in the joint statement.

Continued investment in the ‘Big Catch-Up initiative’, launched in 2023 to reach children who missed vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, and other routine immunisation programmes will be critical, she noted.

Why is vaccination important?

WHO states that immunisation is a ‘best buy’ in health with a return on investment of \$54 for every dollar invested and provides a foundation for future prosperity and health security. Over the last 50 years, essential vaccines have saved at least 154 million lives. That’s six lives a minute, every day, for five decades, noted WHO. During this time, vaccination also accounts for 40% of the improvement in infant survival, and more children now live to see their first birthday and beyond than at any other time in human history. The measles vaccine alone accounts for 60% of those lives saved. While the world has eradicated smallpox and almost eradicated polio through vaccination, annually vaccines save nearly 4.2 million lives against 14 diseases.

India has also reaped the benefits of immunisation and improved health care, with senior health ministry officials stating that immunisation is one of the most effective and cost-efficient interventions for controlling and eradicating diseases.

According to a health ministry official, the Universal Immunization Programme (UIP) is one of India’s most comprehensive public health initiatives, aiming to provide life-saving vaccines to millions of newborns and pregnant women each year.

Vaccines help protect individuals from diseases like measles, polio, tuberculosis, and more recently COVID-19. By reducing the incidence of infectious diseases, immunisation also builds herd immunity. According to UNICEF, in India every year, nearly 26 million newborns and 34 million pregnant women are targeted for immunisation, and over 13 million immunisation sessions are held nationwide to vaccinate children and pregnant women.

“Over the last two decades, India has significantly improved health outcomes, particularly child health and immunisation. The country was certified polio-free in 2014 and eliminated maternal and neonatal tetanus in 2015. New vaccines, including the Measles-Rubella, Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (PCV) and Rotavirus Vaccine (RVV), have been introduced and expanded nationwide,” it notes. According to the National Family Health Survey-5, 2019-21, the country’s full immunisation coverage stands at 76.1%, which means that one child out of every four is missing out on essential vaccines.

What is the way forward?

The WHO, UNICEF and Gavi urgently call for parents, the public, and politicians to strengthen support for immunisation. The agencies emphasise the need for sustained investment in vaccines and immunisation programmes and urge countries to honour their commitments to the Immunisation Agenda 2030. Gavi’s pledging summit on June 25, 2025 seeks to raise at least \$9 billion from donors to fund an ambitious strategy to protect 500 million children, saving at least eight million lives from 2026 to 2030.