

Pakistan introduces vaccine to prevent top child killer

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This month, Pakistan is introducing a new combination vaccine that will protect its children against the bacterium *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) and four other common childhood diseases.

Hib, a bacterium that can cause deadly meningitis and pneumonia, is one of the top killers of young children in the developing world. Even with treatment, an estimated 23,000 children die of Hib disease in Pakistan every year. Survivors are often permanently disabled—paralyzed, deafened or brain damaged. Globally, over 1,000 children under 5 years of age die from Hib-related diseases each day.

"This is excellent news for generations of Pakistani children and their families. Pakistan is the largest country to date of all developing countries to introduce Hib vaccine into their national immunization program," said Dr. Rana Hajjeh, Director of the Hib Initiative. "The government's decision to introduce Hib-containing pentavalent vaccine will protect millions of infants against some of the most dangerous childhood infections, including one of the major causes of pneumonia and meningitis."

Hib is estimated to cause about 20 percent of life-threatening pneumonia cases, and it is the most common cause of life-threatening meningitis in children under 5 years of age both worldwide and in Pakistan. According to UNICEF and WHO, two million children die from pneumonia every year, making it the top child killer worldwide. Ninety-two thousand of child pneumonia deaths occur in Pakistan alone.

Although health indicators are steadily improving in Pakistan, the nation is still far from achieving its child health-related Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets by 2015. 1 in 10 children still do not survive their fifth birthday. Most child deaths are due to pneumonia, diarrhea, and other vaccine-

preventable diseases. "The introduction of the pentavalent vaccine represents a major stride toward enabling Pakistan's 160 million inhabitants to make further progress towards the MDGs," said Nina Schwalbe, Deputy Executive Secretary, Director of Policy of the GAVI Alliance.

"The arrival of pentavalent will be a new chapter in the history of Pakistan," said Dr. Hussain Bux Memon, Pakistan's programme manager of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI). "This vaccine will help us to save the lives of many children."

The Hib vaccine will be administered through a one-shot immunization called the pentavalent vaccine that also protects against four other deadly diseases: diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, and hepatitis B. The Pakistan campaign follows a highly successful movement in other parts of the world to combat Hib. "The GAVI-supported vaccine has virtually eliminated Hib meningitis as a public health problem in Uganda. Other African countries like the Gambia, Kenya and Malawi are also reported to have seen tremendous decline" said Ms. Schwalbe. "We are hoping to see similar successes in Pakistan and in other countries where the vaccine is being introduced."

In Pakistan, it promises to save the nation's most vulnerable: the children of its poorest families. The government is providing the vaccine free of charge at rural health centers, basic health units, and state-run hospitals, as part of its national immunization program. Pakistan will be the first low-income country in South Asia to introduce the Hib vaccine.

Hib vaccine is a safe, effective and highly cost-effective intervention used for more than 18 years in developed and many developing countries, where it has virtually eliminated Hib disease. It is being purchased with funding from the GAVI Alliance. Since 2000, GAVI has provided funding support and supplies for Hib vaccine under the

pentavalent form to the poorest countries in the world. The organization committed US \$465 million for the introduction of the vaccine.

Source: Johns Hopkins University

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