

UN helps restart measles vaccinations in Ebola-hit W. Africa

9 January 2015

The UN children's agency said on Friday it was helping Ebola-battered countries in west Africa resume measles immunisations at a peak transmission time in the region.

Measles transmission traditionally peaks in west Africa between December and March. The disease can be fatal.

This comes at a time when the Ebola crisis has claimed more than 8,200 lives and overwhelmed health care systems in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea which are at the centre of the epidemic. These countries account for almost all the Ebola deaths and cases worldwide.

UNICEF said a [measles](#) outbreak was declared in Guinea early last year before the Ebola crisis, with the number of confirmed measles cases growing almost fourfold from 59 in 2013 to 215 last year.

Liberia had no measles in 2013 but four confirmed cases have surfaced in the northern Lofa county, one of the areas hardest hit by Ebola.

UNICEF said it was helping to step up measles vaccination programmes in Guinea targeting communities which had not had any Ebola cases for 42 days—the window period for being considered Ebola free.

In Liberia, UNICEF has been targetting its vaccination programme at children under five. Eight counties have been covered and immunisations are to begin in the remaining seven shortly.

"Measles is a major killer of children that can easily be stopped through a safe and effective vaccine," said Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF regional director for west and central Africa.

"But immunisation rates have dropped significantly, further threatening children's lives," he said.

Measles is a viral infection best known by its distinctive red rash that remains one of the leading causes of child mortality despite the availability of a safe and cost-effective vaccine.

In 1980, before the introduction of mass vaccination, measles claimed about 2.6 million lives annually, according to the World Health Organization.

Since then, fatalities have decreased although it still killed 122,000 people in 2012, the majority of whom were children under the age of five.

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APA citation: UN helps restart measles vaccinations in Ebola-hit W. Africa (2015, January 9) retrieved 1 November 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-restart-measles-vaccinations-ebola-hit-africa.html>

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