

Vaccines ready for 50 million in Africa's 'Meningitis Belt'

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A huge vaccination campaign to protect 50 million people against meningitis has been launched in seven African countries aiming to stamp out the deadly virus, health officials said Thursday.

The so-called '[Meningitis](#) Belt' countries—Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan—are to get the jabs to ensure "a dramatic impact across the continent," said Seth Berkley, managing director of GAVI (Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation), the group backed by Microsoft tycoon [Bill Gates](#).

"We've known for a long time that there are terrible epidemics of meningitis every five to seven years in the 'Meningitis Belt'," Berkley told reporters in Geneva.

"Nobody really understands why, but there are hundreds of thousands of cases, if not millions."

Meningitis can kill within 48 hours and cause brain damage, hearing loss or [learning difficulties](#) in 20 percent of sufferers, GAVI said.

The vaccine, produced in association with the Serum Institute of India and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was previously used in Burkina Faso where it led to the eradication of the disease after a year, Berkley said.

Just as important, he added, the lack of disease meant that economic

development could continue in developing countries, whereas previous epidemics tended to stop trade in its tracks.

"People would avoid getting together, and for those who didn't die you ended up with children with [hearing loss](#) and brain abscesses and all kinds of problems," he said, adding that a child dies from a vaccine-preventable disease every 20 seconds.

The three-month project, due to run until the end of the year, is part of a wider plan to cover 26 [African countries](#).

The aim is to cover everyone from babies to young adults up to age 29, GAVI said in a statement. It also said it plans to immunise around 250 million children by 2015 for a range of illnesses and prevent more than 3.9 million deaths.

In total, GAVI's remit covers 73 countries.

Since its establishment in 2000, GAVI has vaccinated 325 million children and prevented more than five million deaths, it claimed.

Working with pharmaceutical companies and public partners, GAVI also helped develop a new vaccine—HPV—against cervical cancer which causes 275,000 deaths a year, one of the largest killers of women in the developed world, Berkley said.

In China, he added, GAVI coordinated a hepatitis B immunisation programme to prevent liver cancer, responsible for about 325,000 deaths a year, owing to the high rate of transmission of the virus from mother to child.

"Over the next decade those cancer deaths will disappear," he said.

The public private partnership made it possible to "shape the market" for vaccines Berkley said, adding that the GAVI system had brought down prices by "as much as a 90 percent".

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