

UN sees uphill malaria fight despite 'phenomenal' success

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Credit: CDC

Malaria still claims nearly 600,000 lives a year, the UN said Thursday, urging further action to boost recent strides in combatting the disease.

A growing resistance to a frontline [malaria](#) drug is compounding the other shortcomings in prevention, diagnosis and treatment, the World Health Organization said.

"The progress we have made in fighting malaria has been phenomenal," this century, said Richard Cibulskis, the coordinator for Strategy, Economics and Elimination in the WHO's Global Malaria Programme.

He told reporters in Geneva that the global incidence of malaria had plunged 30 percent and mortality rates had fallen 40 percent between 2000 and 2013.

"Of the 106 countries with [malaria transmission](#) in the year 2000, 13 have reduced the number of locally acquired cases to zero and four countries are now reporting less than 10 locally acquired cases per year," he said.

But the fight is far from won, WHO warned ahead of World Malaria Day on Saturday.

Malaria killed 584,000 people across the world in 2013, according to WHO, with children under five accounting for at least three-fourths of those deaths.

And that year, only about one in five children in Africa—which accounts for 90 percent of the world's malaria deaths—received effective treatment.

An estimated 278 million people in Africa still live in households without a single insecticide-treated bed net, despite its low cost, WHO said.

On a positive note, there has been a surge in the spread of [rapid diagnostic tests](#) to help detect the disease.

More than 319 million such tests, which cost 50 cents each, were bought worldwide in 2013, up from just 46 million five years earlier.

But despite this advance, nearly 40 percent of people who arrived at public health facilities in Africa with malaria symptoms are still not tested.

Drug resistance

A major worry now is resistance to frontline drug artemisinin.

This has not yet been detected in Africa, but is a growing problem in southeast Asian nations like Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, and is suspected, though not proven, to have taken hold in South America.

The [malaria parasite](#) is transmitted via the bites of infected mosquitoes.

It multiplies in the human liver and infects [red blood cells](#), and can be deadly if untreated.

There have been two examples in history of malaria drugs becoming less effective due to the emergence of resistance—costing millions of lives.

The WHO, which recommends artemisinin-based combination therapies or ACTs, said 392 million ACTs had been acquired by malaria-prone countries in 2013 against 11 million in 2005.

But still millions of people were still not being treated this way as "communities most effected by the disease have limited access to health care."

Peter Olumese, the WHO's Medical Officer for Diagnosis, Treatment and Vaccines, said another problem was that doses for children were often "sub-optimal" and therefore ineffective.

WHO said a major gap lay in funding, with only just over half of the

\$5.1 billion required annually to fight malaria currently covered.

By 2030, WHO projects that \$9.0 billion will be required annually to battle the disease, mainly due to the world's growing population.

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