Three dead as diphtheria spreads in Yemen

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Three people have died of suspected diphtheria in conflict-hit Yemen, doctors said Wednesday, as the World Health Organisation and International Committee of the Red Cross warned the disease was spreading.

"Currently, there is an increase in diphtheria cases, due to the poor vaccination coverage for children under five years of age," an ICRC spokeswoman told AFP.

The WHO also confirmed diphtheria cases had appeared in Yemen, where war and a port and airport blockade has left hospitals struggling to secure basic medical supplies including vaccines.

In the port city of Hodeida, caught in the blockade by a Saudi-led military coalition fighting Yemeni rebels, paediatrician Ousan al-Absi at the Al-Thawra hospital said three people had died of diphtheria over the past 24 hours.

"We were surprised by the emergence of diphtheria cases here. We diagnosed and gave them emergency care as best we could," he said.

"Some of them were dying when they arrived."

Local man Ibrahim al-Musbahi said he had sold all of his possessions to pay for his family to be admitted after his five children and wife came down with what doctor suspected was diphtheria.

His 11-year-old daughter, Yasmin, died on Wednesday morning. She had already been battling kidney failure when the doctor diagnosed her.

"The first one who got sick was Yasmin, and then her brothers and sisters. And then their mother got sick," Musbahi told AFP, adding he was also feeling some symptoms.

"My financial situation is so bad I sold everything for the sake of my kids. I just wish I could find someone to take care of, to cure, my kids."

Diphtheria, a bacterial infection that is preventable by vaccine, attacks the nose and throat and—if left untreated—the heart and nervous system.

While it is treatable, the infection can be deadly, particularly for children. The US-based Mayo Clinic estimates up to three percent of those who contract diphtheria will die.

More than 2,000 people have died of cholera in Yemen this year, adding to the 8,600 who have died in the conflict between the Saudi-backed government and rebels since 2015.

The blockade on Yemen's ports and airports, put in place after the Iranian-backed Huthi rebels fired a missile into Saudi territory, has tightened the stranglehold around Hodeida, a key conduit for much-needed food and medicine imports to Yemen.

The United Nations has warned that unless the blockade is lifted, Yemen will face "the largest famine the world has seen for decades".

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