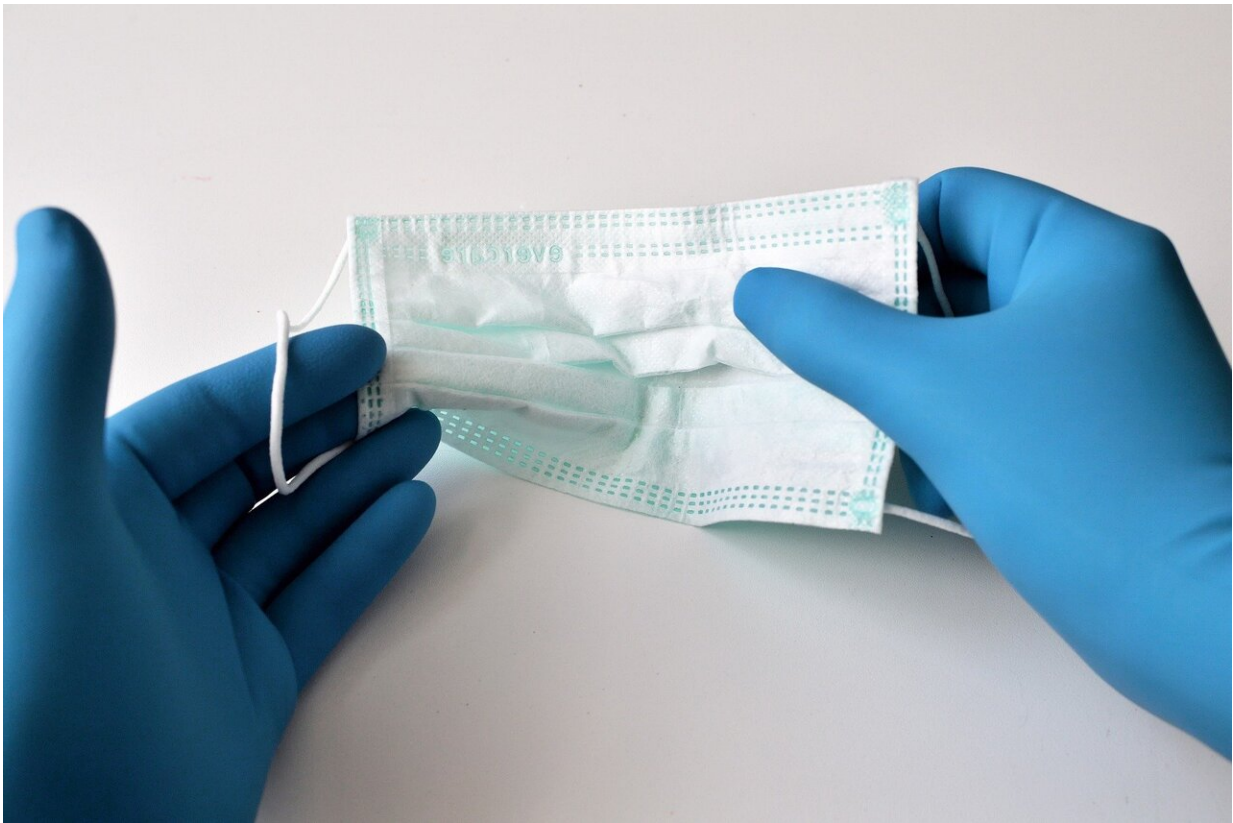


Antimicrobial resistance as dangerous as pandemic: WHO

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The World Health Organization warned Friday that growing antimicrobial resistance is every bit as dangerous as the coronavirus pandemic—and threatens to reverse a century of medical progress.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called the issue "one of the greatest health threats of our time".

Resistance is when bugs become immune to existing drugs—antibiotic, antiviral or antifungal treatments—rendering minor injuries and common infections potentially deadly.

Resistance has grown in recent years due to overuse of such drugs in humans and also in farm animals.

"Antimicrobial resistance may not seem as urgent as a pandemic but it is just as dangerous," Tedros told a virtual press conference.

"It threatens to unwind a century of medical progress and leave us defenceless against infections that today can be treated easily," he said.

The WHO said antimicrobial resistance was endangering food security, economic development and the planet's ability to fight diseases.

Resistance has led to increased health care costs, hospital admissions, treatment failures, severe illnesses and deaths, the UN health agency said.

The WHO joined forces with the Food and Agriculture Organization and with the World Organisation for Animal Health to launch a new group to advocate for urgent action to combat the threat.

The One Health Global Leaders Group on Antimicrobial Resistance will bring together heads of government, company chief executives and civil society leaders.

The group is co-chaired by Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and Mia Mottley of Barbados.

"We need worldwide coordinated actions to monitor the nature of infections, to implement required control measures and raise global awareness against the widespread use of antibiotics," Hasina said.

Death toll warning

Discovered in the 1920s, antibiotics have saved tens of millions of lives by seeing off bacterial diseases such as pneumonia, tuberculosis and meningitis.

But over the decades, bacteria have learned to fight back, building resistance to the same drugs that once reliably vanquished them—turning into so-called "superbugs".

The International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations said superbugs were already taking an heavy toll.

"About 700,000 people globally die each year due to antimicrobial resistance," the IFPMA said in a statement welcoming the new group.

"Without strong action to ensure appropriate use of existing antibiotics, as well as new and better treatments, that figure could rise to 10 million by 2050."

Tedros said that while antibiotics are a key focus, antimicrobial resistance also included resistance to medicines for HIV, malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a "stark reminder" that human health cannot be advanced while disregarding the health of animals and the environment, he added.

The novel coronavirus has killed at least 1.36 million people since the

outbreak emerged in China last December, while nearly 56.9 million cases have been registered, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP.

Turning to the pandemic, Tedros said more cases had been reported in the past four weeks than in the first six months, while hospitals and their intensive care units were filling up across Europe and North America.

"This week there has been more good news from vaccine trials which continues to give us hope of ending the pandemic," he said.

"At the same time, we must continue to use the tools we have to interrupt the chains of transmission and save lives now."

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