

Measles cases, deaths surging in Afghanistan: WHO

February 11 2022

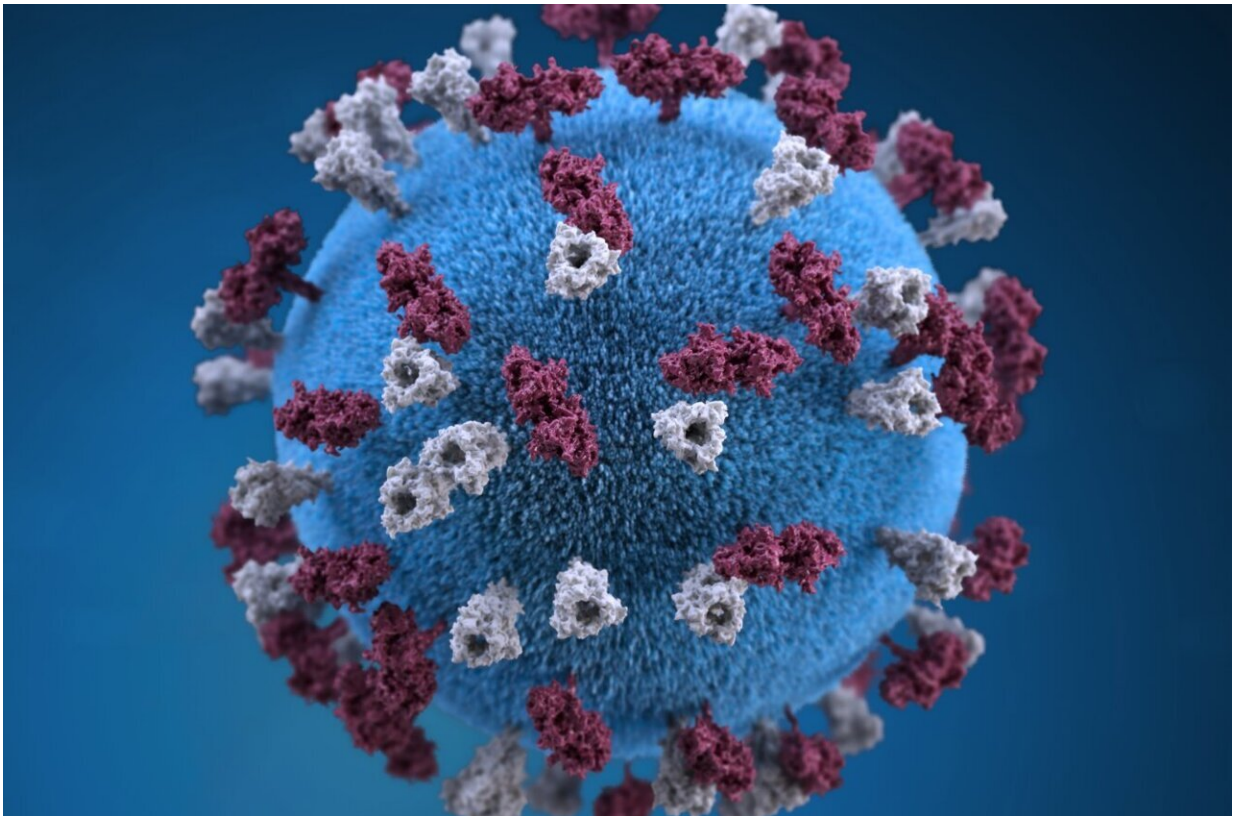


Illustration of the virus which causes measles. Credit: CDC/ Allison M. Maiuri, MPH, CHES

A raging measles outbreak in Afghanistan infected tens of thousands and killed more than 150 people last month alone, the World Health

Organization said Friday, warning of more deaths.

The UN health agency said the outbreak was particularly concerning since Afghanistan is facing massive food insecurity and malnutrition, leaving children far more vulnerable to the highly [contagious disease](#).

"Measles cases have been increasing in all provinces since the end of July 2021," WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier told reporters in Geneva.

He said cases had surged recently, ballooning by 18 percent in the week of January 24 and by 40 percent in the last week of the month.

In all, 35,319 suspected [measles cases](#) were reported in January, including 3,000 that were laboratory confirmed, and 156 deaths.

Ninety-one percent of the cases and 97 percent of the deaths were children under the age of five.

Lindmeier stressed that the measles-related deaths were likely underreported and the numbers were expected to swell.

"The rapid rise in cases in January suggests that the number of deaths due to measles is likely to increase sharply in the coming weeks," Lindmeier said.

Measles is a highly-contagious disease caused by a virus that attacks mainly children. The most serious complications include blindness, brain swelling, diarrhoea, and severe respiratory infections.

The latest surge in cases comes as Afghanistan is in the grip of a humanitarian disaster, worsened by the Taliban takeover in August—when Western countries froze international aid and access to

assets held abroad.

The United Nations has warned that half the country is threatened with food shortages.

"Malnutrition weakens immunity, making people more vulnerable to illness and deaths diseases like measles, especially children," Lindmeier said.

The best protection against measles is broad vaccination, with the WHO recommending that countries ensure at least 95-percent vaccination coverage—a difficult goal in the Afghan context.

Lindmeier said the WHO and its partners had been working to scale up their measles surveillance capacities and provide support for things like lab testing and immunisation campaigns.

Last December, a vaccination campaign in the hardest-hit areas reached 1.5 million children, he said.

They have also been providing Vitamin A supplements, which are important to help reduce sickness and [death](#) from measles, reaching 8.5 million children in a nationwide campaign last November.

The WHO, Lindmeier said, was now working towards a larger [measles](#) vaccination drive starting in May, aimed at reaching more than three million [children](#).

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Citation: Measles cases, deaths surging in Afghanistan: WHO (2022, February 11) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-02-measles-cases-deaths-surging-afghanistan.html>

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