

Malaria jabs set for broader rollout in Africa

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The United Nations heralded Wednesday the forthcoming scale-up of malaria vaccination across Africa after the first shipment of doses arrived in Cameroon.

Since 2019, more than two million children have been jabbed in Ghana,

Kenya and Malawi in a pilot phase, resulting in substantial reductions in severe malaria illness and hospitalizations.

Now the scheme is moving into a broader rollout, with 331,200 doses of RTS,S—the first malaria vaccine recommended by the UN's World Health Organization—landing Tuesday in Cameroon's capital Yaounde.

The delivery "signals that scale-up of vaccination against malaria across the highest-risk areas on the African continent will begin shortly," the WHO, the UN children's agency UNICEF and the Gavi vaccine alliance said in a joint statement.

They called it "a historic step towards broader vaccination against one of the deadliest diseases for African children".

The doses are donated by manufacturer GSK.

"We encourage all parents to take advantage of this life-saving intervention," said Cameroon's Health Minister Malachie Manaouda, adding that malaria "remains a major public health threat in the country".

A further 1.7 million doses are set for delivery to Burkina Faso, Liberia, Niger and Sierra Leone in the coming weeks.

Malaria is the leading cause of mortality in infants and children aged under five in Liberia, the country's Health Minister Wilhelmina Jallah said.

"This vaccine has the potential to save many lives and reduce the burden of this disease," she added.

'Breakthrough moment'

Several African countries are finalizing preparations for malaria vaccines to be introduced into routine immunization programs, with the first doses set to be administered in January-March 2024.

"Introducing vaccines is like adding a star player to the pitch... we are entering a new era in immunization and malaria control," said UNICEF chief Catherine Russell.

Africa accounted for approximately 95 percent of global malaria cases and 96 percent of related deaths from the mosquito-borne disease in 2021.

Yearly global malaria deaths fell dramatically between 2000 and 2019—when they stood at 568,000—but shot up 10 percent in 2020 to 625,000 as the COVID-19 crisis hit protection and treatment efforts.

Deaths dipped slightly to 619,000 in 2021—of which 77 percent were children aged under five. Meanwhile, global malaria cases rose slightly to 247 million.

The vaccine rollout is a "breakthrough moment for malaria vaccines and malaria control, and a ray of light in a dark time for so many vulnerable children in the world", said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The RTS,S vaccine acts against *plasmodium falciparum*—the most deadly malaria parasite globally and the most prevalent in Africa.

It is administered in a four-dose schedule which begins at around the age of five months old.

"Broad implementation of malaria vaccination in endemic regions has the potential to be a game-changer for malaria control efforts, and could save tens of thousands of lives each year," the joint statement said.

"This moment has been decades in the making," said the United States' global malaria coordinator David Walton, as he looked forward to "a world in which no child dies from a mosquito bite".

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