

Sierra Leone starts cholera vaccination drive in disaster areas

Half a million Sierra Leone citizens will have access to life-saving cholera vaccine following severe floods and landslides last month, which increase the risk of the water-borne disease.



Photo: RTE Ireland

The vaccines come from the Gavi-funded global stockpile and will target areas particularly affected by August's floods and deadly landslide, which resulted in over 500 confirmed deaths. Hundreds more people were reported missing in the wake of the disaster, according to the country's Office of National Security, while thousands were displaced from their homes.

"Cholera is a devastating disease which spreads quickly and kills fast, and risks can increase after severe flooding," said Dr Brima Kargbo, chief medical officer at the Ministry of Health and Sanitation. "The oral cholera vaccine is an important tool to better protect the country and affected communities against the disease, which will ultimately save lives."

Two rounds of vaccination are planned to run from September and will be delivered in 25 affected communities by the government of Sierra Leone with support from Gavi Alliance, the World Health Organisation (WHO), Unicef, the UK government and other health partners.

"Access to safe water and sanitation is limited, and the public health system, still recovering after the 2014 Ebola outbreak, is stretched. These lifesaving vaccines, alongside urgent support to improve safe water and sanitation, have the potential to

prevent a cholera outbreak before it has the chance to bring more misery to a country that has already suffered enough,” said Dr Seth Berkley, CEO of Gavi Alliance.

WHO recommends that vaccination against cholera be considered in emergencies and other high-risk scenarios where there are increased threats of outbreaks, when combined with standard prevention and control measures for the disease. These measures include readiness to provide adequate testing and treatment, steps to ensure access to safe water and sanitation, and community mobilisation to engage the public in preventing infection.

Sierra Leone’s last major cholera outbreak, in 2012, killed 392 people and infected more than 25,000 others.

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