

Malawi declares polio outbreak

The health authorities in Malawi have declared an outbreak of wild poliovirus type 1 after a case was detected in a young child in the capital Lilongwe. This is the first case of wild poliovirus in Africa in more than five years.



Source: Supplied. Regional Office for Africa, World Health Organization.

Africa was declared free of indigenous wild polio in August 2020 after eliminating all forms of wild polio from the region.

Laboratory analysis shows that the strain detected in Malawi is linked to the one that has been circulating in Sindh Province in Pakistan. Polio remains endemic in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As an imported case from Pakistan, this detection does not affect the African region's wild poliovirus-free certification status.

"As long as wild polio exists anywhere in the world all countries remain at risk of importation of the virus," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, World Health Organization (WHO) regional director for Africa. "Following the detection of wild polio in Malawi, we're taking urgent measures to forestall its potential spread.

"Thanks to a high level of polio surveillance in the continent and the capacity to quickly detect the virus, we can swiftly launch a rapid response and protect children from the debilitating impact of this disease."

Risk assessment underway

WHO is supporting the Malawi health authorities to carry out a risk assessment and outbreak response, including supplemental immunisation. surveillance of the disease is also being ramped up in neighbouring countries. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) rapid response team which is based at the WHO Regional Office in Africa is deploying a team to Malawi to support co-ordination, surveillance, data management, communications, and operations. Partner organisations will also send teams to support emergency operations and innovative vaccination campaign solutions.

"The last case of wild polio virus in Africa was identified in northern Nigeria in 2016 and globally there were only five cases in 2021. Any case of wild polio virus is a significant event and we will mobilise all resources to support the country's response," said Dr Modjirom Ndoutabe, polio co-ordinator in the WHO Regional Office for Africa.

"Polio can cause total paralysis within hours"

Polio is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. It invades the nervous system and can cause total paralysis within hours. The virus is transmitted from person-to-person mainly through the faecal-oral route or, less frequently, through contaminated water or food, and multiplies in the intestine.

While there is no cure for polio, the disease can be prevented through administration of a simple and effective vaccine.

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