

Media release

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One child dies of pneumonia every 39 seconds, agencies warn

Pneumonia – a preventable disease – kills more children than any other infection

LONDON/NEW YORK/BARCELONA (November 12, 2019)—Pneumonia claimed the lives of more than 800,000 children under the age of five last year, or one child every 39 seconds, according to a new analysis.

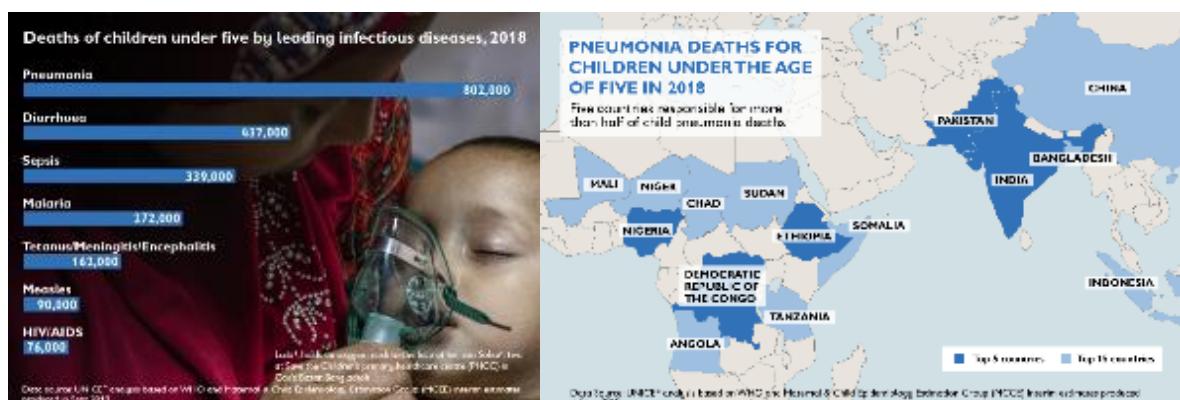
Most deaths occurred among children under the age of two, and almost 153,000 within the first month of life. [1]

Sounding the alarm about this forgotten epidemic, six leading health and children’s organisations are today launching an appeal for global action. [2]

In January the group will host world leaders at the [Global Forum on Childhood Pneumonia](#) in Spain.

Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, said:

“Every day, nearly 2,200 children under the age of five die from pneumonia, a curable and mostly preventable disease. Strong global commitment and increased investments are critical to the fight against this disease. Only through cost-effective protective, preventative and treatment interventions delivered to where children are will we be able to truly save millions of lives.”



Pneumonia is caused by bacteria, viruses or fungi, and leaves children fighting for breath as their lungs fill with pus and fluid.

More children under the age of five died from the disease in 2018 than from any other. 437,000 children under five died due to diarrhoea and 272,000 to malaria.

Kevin Watkins, Chief Executive of Save the Children in the UK, said:

“This is a forgotten global epidemic that demands an urgent international response. Millions of children are dying for want of vaccines, affordable antibiotics, and routine oxygen treatment. The pneumonia crisis is a symptom of neglect and indefensible inequalities in access to health care.”

Just five countries were responsible for more than half of child pneumonia deaths: Nigeria (162,000), India (127,000), Pakistan (58,000), the Democratic Republic of Congo (40,000) and Ethiopia (32,000). [3]

Children with immune systems weakened by other infections like HIV or by malnutrition, and those living in areas with high levels of air pollution and unsafe water, are at far greater risk.

The disease can be prevented with vaccines, and easily treated with low-cost antibiotics if properly diagnosed.

But tens of millions of children are still going unvaccinated – and one in three with symptoms do not receive essential medical care. [4]

Children with severe cases of pneumonia may also require oxygen treatment, which is rarely available in the poorest countries to the children who need it.

Dr Seth Berkley, CEO of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, said:

“The fact that this preventable, treatable and easily diagnosed disease is still the world’s biggest killer of young children is frankly shocking. We have made strong progress over the last decade, with millions of children in the world’s poorest countries now receiving the lifesaving pneumococcal vaccine. Thanks largely to Gavi’s support, pneumococcal vaccine coverage in low-income countries is now higher than the global average, but we still have work to do to ensure every child has access to this lifesaver.”

Funding available to tackle pneumonia lags far behind other diseases. Only 3% of current global infectious disease research spending is allocated to pneumonia, despite the disease causing 15% of deaths in children under the age of five.

Leith Greenslade, Coordinator of Every Breath Counts, said:

“For decades the leading killer of children has been a neglected disease and the world’s most vulnerable children have paid the price. It’s time for governments, UN and multilateral agencies, companies and NGOs to join forces to fight pneumonia and protect these children.”

In a joint call to action, the organisations urge:

- Governments in the worst-affected countries to develop and implement **Pneumonia Control Strategies** to reduce child pneumonia deaths; and to improve access to primary health care as part of a wider strategy for universal health coverage;
- Richer countries, international donors and private sector companies to boost immunisation coverage by **reducing the cost of key vaccines** and **ensuring the successful replenishment of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance**; and to **increase funding for research and innovation** to tackle pneumonia.

Although pneumonia is reasonably common, it remains a potentially very serious condition, especially in young children and the elderly, with about six percent of those affected dying from the disease.

In New Zealand childhood pneumonia rates are highest in the most deprived areas, with rates 2.1 times higher in the Lakes, Northland and Auckland areas.

According to the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation of NZ, of the 122 children who died between 2006 and 2015, 53 were Māori and 38 Pacific, 5 Asian, and 26 other New Zealanders (non-Māori, non-Pacific, non-Asian).

Childhood death rates from pneumonia are 4.1 times higher for Māori children and 5.6 times higher for Pacific children than for other New Zealanders (non-MPA).

Save the Children CEO Heidi Coetzee, said:

“It’s appalling that close to a million children are dying every year from a disease that we have the knowledge and resources to defeat. Although vaccines and other preventative efforts are decreasing the burden of the disease, much more work is needed. Both in New Zealand and overseas those living in poor communities are at the highest risk of pneumonia. Every child, regardless of where they are born, deserves access to lifesaving vaccines and medicines.

“We need to join forces and fight this head on, with early diagnosis and access to healthcare, as well as better nutrition and housing for all children.

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Notes to Editors:

[1] UNICEF analysis, based on WHO and Maternal and Child Epidemiology Estimation Group (MCEE) interim estimates produced in September 2019.

[2] **ISGlobal, Save the Children, UNICEF, Every Breath Counts, Unitaid and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance** are calling for concrete commitments from high-burden countries and international donors to tackle pneumonia. Together with the **“la Caixa” Foundation**, the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation** and **USAID**, the group will host the [Global Forum on Childhood Pneumonia](#) in Spain on 29-31 January.

[3] The top 15 countries by pneumonia deaths for children under the age of five in 2018, were:

Country Name	Estimated number of pneumonia-related deaths in children under five, 2018
Nigeria	162,000
India	127,000
Pakistan	58,000
Democratic Republic of the Congo	40,000
Ethiopia	32,000
Indonesia	19,000
China	18,000
Chad	18,000
Angola	16,000
United Republic of Tanzania	15,000
Somalia	15,000
Niger	13,000

Mali	13,000
Bangladesh	12,000
Sudan	11,000
Global	802,000

Source: UNICEF analysis, based on WHO and Maternal and Child Epidemiology Estimation Group (MCEE) interim estimates

[4] In 2018, 71 million children did not receive the recommended three doses of pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV), putting them at higher risk of pneumonia. Globally, 32% of children with suspected pneumonia are not taken to a health facility. That figure rises to 40% for the poorest children in low- and middle-income countries.

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