

'Rotavirus vaccine can reduce infant mortality'

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International Symposium on Rotavirus: Experts converge at Delhi



Rotavirus, a leading cause of severe and fatal diarrhea in children under five years of age worldwide, has been a major cause of worry across the globe. Killing between a quarter and a half-a million children each year, rotavirus significantly impedes achieving the Millennium Development Goal 4: reduce child mortality. The Eleventh International Rotavirus Symposium that began from September 03, 2014 in New Delhi, has drawn various stakeholders to deliberate upon the means to tackle the disease.

As per Dr Mathuram Santosham, chair of ROTA Council and professor of International Health and Pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, United States. "We cannot reduce death and suffering from rotavirus as well as its significant economic toll without vaccines. Greater prioritization of rotavirus vaccines will protect children and avoid substantial health costs to families and health care systems. India, which has a heavy rotavirus burden but is home to a promising new vaccine, is the perfect setting to evaluate the current scientific evidence on rotavirus vaccines for informed decision-making."

In 2014, India announced the introduction of a new vaccine, shown to reduce severe diarrhea, caused by the rotavirus, by 56 percent, in the national immunization program. Rotavirus is estimated to cause more than 78,000 deaths, 800,000 hospitalizations and three million outpatient visits each year in India.

If used in all GAVI-eligible countries, rotavirus vaccines could also prevent an estimated 180,000 deaths and avert six million clinic and hospital visits each year, saving \$68 million in annual treatment costs. Yet, despite the WHO's recommendation for all countries to introduce rotavirus vaccines in their national immunization programs, only 35 percent of countries worldwide (69) have done so. Of those countries, only one is in Asia.

"Every child deserves the chance to live a long, healthy, productive life," said Dr Gagandeep Kang, head of the Wellcome Trust Research Laboratory at the Christian Medical College in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India. "When rotavirus vaccines are part of a comprehensive strategy including oral rehydration solution (ORS), breastfeeding, good nutrition, and improved water, sanitation, and hygiene, we can make this vision a reality."

Globally, diarrhea is one of the most common causes of hospitalizations of children. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than one-third (36 percent) of all hospitalizations for severe diarrhea are caused by rotavirus. In some settings around the world, hospitalizations are a tremendous financial burden to already impoverished families and

strain health systems. However, rotavirus vaccines could cut hospitalizations of children under five by four to eight percent and substantially improve child health and survival.

Overall, 95 percent of rotavirus deaths occur in developing countries like Asia and Africa. In Asia, rotavirus kills approximately 188,000 children under five each year and in Africa, rotavirus kills 232,000 children. However, children everywhere are at risk of infection.