

11 nations pledge to eliminate measles by 2020

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Singapore: At the World Health Organization's regional committee meeting for the South East Asian region, India along with ten other countries pledged to eliminate measles by 2020. Improvement of immunization and dramatic enhancement of case detection were suggested as strong ways to help accomplish that goal in India.

All the 11 nations have decided to eliminate measles and control a milder infection called rubella, which threatens fetuses with congenital abnormalities, by the year 2020. As per WHO estimates, over 70,700 children died of measles in the 11 countries of the South East Asian region during 2011. It further estimated that in this region, eight million children are not protected from the infection although the measles and rubella vaccines are safe, effective and inexpensive.

The measles elimination is defined by these countries as the absence of any measles transmission in a defined geographic area for at least 12 months in the presence of a well-performing surveillance system.

"We believe elimination by 2020 can be done. The South East Asian region will most likely be certified polio-free in five months and measles elimination will be the new goal," Arun Thapa, coordinator for immunization and vaccines development in the regional office of the WHO said at the conference.

Indian health officials claim that the country lost about 40,000 children to measles during 2010. Public health experts have been cautioning that the country's disease surveillance network and information flow from private doctors to the government is so weak that the actual figure is likely to be larger.

Health officials said at the meeting that India needs to improve routine immunization coverage with the first dose of a measles vaccine from the current national average of 72 percent to a uniform 95 percent nationwide and expand coverage with a second dose.

The WHO has said improved immunization in the South East Asian region has led to a 48 percent decrease in measles deaths between 2000 and 2011. While rubella is a milder infection, pregnant women who get rubella are at risk of having babies with congenital rubella syndrome.

The regional committee meeting has also set a goal of reducing rubella (German measles) infections by 95 percent from

2008 figures.