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Covid-19 Impact on Measles Immunization Program

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Why in News

According to the **United Nations (UN)**, due to the **Covid-19 pandemic**, **measles immunisation campaigns have been delayed** in 24 countries and will be canceled in 13 other countries.

The reason being that the **healthcare workers are required to deal with the pandemic** in countries where healthcare systems are inadequate.

Key Points

- The **coronavirus pandemic**, which has necessitated many prevention measures including strict lockdowns, **has kept infants from getting routine immunisation services** from some other diseases such as **polio, yellow fever** and cholera.
- Countries including Mexico, Bolivia, Lebanon, Nepal and Chile are among others who have delayed their immunisation campaigns.
- Some of the **countries currently amid measles outbreak** include Nigeria, Ukraine, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kazakhstan among others.
- According to a report in the journal Nature, the **reproduction number for measles**, which is the number of people who get infected by an individual who has the disease, **is somewhere between 12-18**, which **makes measles the most contagious virus known**.
- According to the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, mass immunisation drives and routine vaccination for children are the key public health strategies against the Measles. Therefore, delaying the campaigns affects these strategies, potentially putting the life of thousands of children at risk.

- The WHO released an **interim guideline** for carrying out immunisation activities during Covid-19 on 26th March, 2020.
 - It says if immunisation activities are negatively impacted during the pandemic, respective countries will need to design strategies for delivering “catch-up” vaccines after the outbreak subsides. Implementing this will require strategies to **track and follow-up with individuals who missed getting vaccinated**, assessing immunity gaps and re-establishing community demand.
 - Further, it has advised that **mass immunisation campaigns** be **“temporarily suspended”** in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and that countries should monitor the necessity of delaying these campaigns at regular intervals.

Measles

- **Measles** is a **highly contagious viral disease** and despite the availability of a vaccine against it, it remains to be a **leading cause of death among young children globally**.
- The disease is **transmitted via droplets** released from the nose, mouth or throat of infected persons.
- The **initial symptoms** occur **10-12 days after contracting the infection** and include high fever, a runny nose, bloodshot eyes and the appearance of white spots on the inside of the mouth.
- **Some of the most serious complications** arising out of the disease include **blindness, encephalitis (brain swelling), severe diarrhea, dehydration and severe respiratory infections such as pneumonia**.
- The disease is **common in parts of Africa and Asia** and is more likely among poorly nourished children, especially those who are **deficient in vitamin A**.
- Measles **claimed 140,000 lives in 2018**, mostly of children and babies.
- The **measles vaccine has been in use since the 1960s**. It is safe, effective and inexpensive.
- As per the WHO, reaching all children with 2 doses of measles vaccine, either alone, or in a measles-rubella (MR), measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), or measles-mumps-rubella-varicella (MMRV) combination, should be the standard for all national immunization programmes.
 - In **India**, the first dose of measles vaccine was introduced in the 1990s.
 - India introduced the second dose from 2010 onwards. India was one of the last countries to add a second dose of measles vaccine.
- In 2019, **Sri Lanka** became the fifth country in the **WHO southeast Asia region to eliminate measles**. The other countries in the region which have eliminated measles in their geographical area are **Bhutan, Maldives, DPR Korea and Timor-Leste**.

Source: IE