Children in South Asia could face health crisis amid COVID-19: UNICEF

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Expressing concern over the disruptions caused in immunisations due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) warned that South Asia could face yet another health emergency if children across the region did not receive their life-saving vaccine shots.

Important Points

1. Almost a quarter of the world’s unimmunised or partially immunised children – about 4.5 million children – live in South Asia. Almost all of them, or 97%, live in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.
2. Across the region, national mass vaccination campaigns have been postponed. Bangladesh and Nepal have postponed their national measles and rubella campaigns while Pakistan and Afghanistan have suspended their polio campaigns.

Reasons

1. With lockdown in place as a part of the novel coronavirus response, routine immunisations have been severely disrupted and parents are increasingly reluctant to take their children to health centres for routine jabs.
2. Sporadic outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, including measles and diphtheria, have already been seen in parts of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal.
3. The South Asia region is also home to two of the last polio endemic countries in the world, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
4. Vaccine stocks are running dangerously low in some countries of the region as supply chains have been disrupted with travel bans and cancelled flights.
5. The manufacturing of the vaccines has also been disrupted, creating additional shortages.
6. Many of the health facilities throughout the region, where millions of children are normally vaccinated, have been closed and outreach sessions have been suspended, adding to the challenge.
7. South Asia could face yet another health emergency if children across the region do not receive their life-saving vaccine shots, the UNICEF said.
8. As long as frontline health workers take the appropriate precautions, particularly washing their hands, there is no reason not to vaccinate – in fact, it is crucial that vaccination continues
The UNICEF strongly recommends that, where immunisation campaigns are suspended, governments begin rigorous planning now to intensify immunisation activities once the COVID-19 pandemic is under control.


- It is a United Nations agency **responsible for providing** humanitarian and developmental aid to children worldwide.
- It is among the **most widespread and recognizable social welfare organizations** in the world.
- UNICEF’s activities include:
  - Immunizations and disease prevention
  - Administering treatment for children and mothers with HIV
  - Enhancing childhood and maternal nutrition
  - Improving sanitation
  - Promoting education
  - Providing emergency relief in response to disasters

- UNICEF relies **entirely on contributions** from governments and private donors.
- Its Headquarter is in New York City, US.