Measles and Rubella

GS-Paper-3 Health and Children

Recently, the Maldives and Sri Lanka have become the first two countries in the World Health Organisation’s South-East Asian Region (WHO SEAR) to have eliminated both measles and rubella ahead of the 2023 deadline. In September 2019, member countries of WHO SEAR set 2023 as the target for the elimination of measles and rubella.

The announcement came after the 5th meeting of the SEAR Verification Commission for Measles and Rubella Elimination. The Commission comprises 11 independent international experts in the fields of epidemiology, virology and public health.

Bhutan, DPR Korea and Timor-Leste are countries in the region which have eliminated measles. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste have controlled Rubella.

Criteria:
A country is verified as having eliminated measles and rubella when there is no evidence of endemic transmission of the respective viruses for over three years in the presence of a well-performing surveillance system.

The Maldives reported its last endemic case of measles in 2009 and of rubella in October 2015. Sri Lanka reported the last endemic case of measles in May 2016 and of rubella in March 2017.

Steps Taken:

- All countries in the region introduced two doses of measles-containing vaccine and at least one dose of rubella-containing vaccine in their routine immunisation programme.
- Since 2017, nearly 500 million additional children have been vaccinated with measles and rubella-containing vaccines.
- Surveillance for measles and rubella has been strengthened further.
- The announcement comes amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and the success demonstrates the importance of joint efforts.
- Globally, more than half of all countries reported moderate-to-severe disruptions or a total suspension of vaccination services in March and April.
- Regionally, both immunisation coverage and surveillance were impacted. However, SEAR countries made coordinated efforts to resume
immunisation and surveillance activities.

Measles

- It is a highly contagious viral disease and is a cause of death among young children globally.
- It is particularly dangerous for children from the economically weaker background, as it attacks malnourished children and those with reduced immunity.
- It can cause serious complications, including blindness, encephalitis, severe diarrhoea, ear infection and pneumonia.

Rubella

- It is also called German Measles.
- Rubella is a contagious, generally mild viral infection that occurs most often in children and young adults.
- Rubella infection in pregnant women may cause death or congenital defects known as Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS) which causes irreversible birth defects.

Measures and Vaccinations

- The Measles and Rubella Initiative is a global program which aims at eliminating both these diseases.
- The vaccine for the diseases are provided in the form of measles-rubella (MR), measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) or measles-mumps-rubella-varicella (MMRV) combination.

India and Measles

Despite the availability of a safe and effective vaccine since the 1960s, both measles and rubella are major public health concerns in India.

More than 1.3 million children acquire measles infection and around 49,000 infected children die each year, contributing nearly 36% to the global figures.

Rubella infection in pregnant women may cause fetal death or congenital defects. It leads to the development of birth defects in almost 40,000 children annually in the country.

Government initiatives:

Measles-Rubella Vaccination

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare launched the MR Vaccination
program in 2017. The MR campaign **targets around 41 crore children** across the country, the largest ever in any campaign.

All **children aged between 9 months and less than 15 years** are given a single shot of MR vaccination irrespective of their previous measles/rubella vaccination status or measles/rubella disease status. MR vaccines are **provided free-of-cost** across the states. Other Initiatives include **Universal Immunization Programme (UIP)**, **Mission Indradhanush** and **Intensified Mission Indradhanush**.