

Kenya becomes 3rd country to roll out malaria vaccine

13/09/2019 20:28 by admin

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The parasitic disease kills about 435,000 people every year, most of them children under 5 in Africa. (Source: File Photo)

Kampala (Uganda): Health authorities in Kenya on Friday started administering doses of the world's only licensed malaria vaccine to young children in rural areas facing high transmission rates.

Kenya became the third African country to introduce the vaccine, after Malawi and Ghana. The aim is to reach about 360,000 children per year across the three countries.

The health ministry described the milestone on Twitter as "a historic day" for the East African country as the health minister launched vaccinations in remote Homa Bay county.

Malaria is a top killer in many African countries. According to the World Health Organization, the region accounted for 92% of the cases and 93% of malaria deaths in 2017.

The parasitic disease kills about 435,000 people every year, most of them children under 5 in Africa.

It took GlaxoSmithKline and partners more than 30 years to develop the vaccine, at a cost of around \$1 billion. GSK is donating up to 10 million vaccine doses in the current vaccination initiatives.

Although the malaria vaccine only protects about one-third of children who are immunized, those who get the shots are likely to have less severe cases of malaria.

Experts have begun testing out other new tools to fight malaria, including the development of genetically modified mosquitoes with an infertility gene.

Resistance is growing to medicines that treat the disease, while mosquitoes are becoming more resistant to insecticides. In addition, funding for malaria efforts has plateaued in recent years.

In neighboring Uganda, health officials last month reported a surge in malaria cases as cases rise even among adolescents. They cited global warming and longer wet seasons for the increase.

- AP