

Around 560 000 children vaccinated in first round of polio campaign in Gaza

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UNICEF/UNI637065/EI Baba

JERUSALEM/AMMAN/GENEVA, 13 SEPTEMBER 2024 - Around 560 000 children under ten years old were vaccinated against polio during the first round of an emergency vaccination campaign conducted in three phases from 1-12 September 2024 in the Gaza Strip.

The 12-day campaign provided novel oral polio vaccine type 2 (nOPV2) to 558 963 children, following meticulous planning and coordination. This involved the use of an extensive network of teams, vaccinating at selected fixed sites at health facilities and outreach posts. Mobile and transit teams actively reached out to families living in shelter homes, tents, and camps for the displaced, alongside community workers engaging families to raise awareness ahead of and during the campaign. For each phase, an area-specific humanitarian pause of nine hours daily was agreed to ensure the safety of communities and health workers, and enable vaccination efforts.

“Health and community workers have shown incredible resilience, carrying out this campaign at unprecedented scale and speed under the toughest conditions in Gaza. Swift action by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative—from the moment the virus was detected to the launch of the vaccination campaign—speaks to the effectiveness of the polio programme. In areas where humanitarian pauses took place, the campaign brought not just vaccines, but moments of calm. As we prepare for the next round in four weeks, we’re hopeful these pauses will hold, because this campaign has clearly shown the world what’s

possible when peace is given a chance,” said Dr Richard Peepkorn, WHO Representative for the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt).

“It was critical this ambitious campaign was carried out quickly, safely and effectively to protect children in the Gaza Strip and neighbouring countries from the life-altering poliovirus,” said Jean Gough, UNICEF Special Representative in the State of Palestine. “The progress made in this first round is encouraging, but the job is far from done. We are poised to finish the task and call on all involved to ensure we can do so in the next round in four weeks' time, for the sake of children everywhere.”

Partners at all levels recognize common operational challenges faced during these efforts, including devastated infrastructure, from health facilities to roads, limited trained healthcare workers, access issues due to insecurity, limited fuel for generators used to safely store vaccines and freeze ice packs, and constant population movements. However, these issues were addressed in a timely manner, with the key support of the Palestinian Ministry of Health and UNRWA, to enable planned vaccination activities.

Despite these challenges and the conditions that families in the Gaza Strip have endured over the past 11 months, families flocked to health facilities to get their children vaccinated. This can be attributed to traditionally positive health seeking behaviour among the Palestinian people and an impactful campaign to raise awareness and mobilize the public.

The original target for the campaign was 640 000 children, estimated in the absence of an accurate survey, which may have been an over-estimate, as the population continues to move from place to place, and people are fleeing and being killed due to the ongoing hostilities. During the campaign, trained monitoring teams were deployed to oversee vaccination efforts. As next steps, an additional 65 independent monitors are being deployed to cross-check the proportion of children vaccinated across the Gaza Strip to independently assess the level of coverage achieved in the first round. They need safe, unimpeded access so they can visit households, markets, transit points, and health facilities to check children for the prominent purple dye marked on their little finger when they are vaccinated. These efforts will provide an independent measure of the percentage of vaccination coverage achieved and reasons for any unvaccinated children.

A second round of the campaign will follow, ideally within four weeks, to provide a second dose of nOPV2 to children in Gaza to stop the outbreak and prevent its international spread.

To repeat this ambitious intervention, reach enough children, and successfully stop further transmission of the poliovirus, WHO, UNICEF and UNRWA are calling on all parties to the conflict to commit to another round of humanitarian pauses, with unimpeded access to children in areas that need special coordination.

Ultimately, we need a long-lasting ceasefire as all families in the Gaza Strip need peace so they can begin to heal and rebuild their lives.

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