

## Tackling Malaria in 2019: Progress Update

### Summary

Malaria is a life-threatening but preventable disease. Goals, milestones and targets for the reduction in malaria mortality and incidence rates are set out by the World Health Organisation (WHO). In 2017, there were an estimated 219 million cases of malaria worldwide, an increase on the 217 million cases estimated in 2016.<sup>1</sup> The WHO's 2020 milestone for reducing malaria incidences in at least ten countries where malaria was endemic in 2015 is likely to be met. However, its goal to reduce deaths by at least 40% by 2020 is "off-track" and "unlikely" to be met. Worldwide, approximately 435,000 people died from malaria globally in 2017, compared with 451,000 deaths in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Some have argued that an increase in funding and a change in focus is required to tackle this rise in deaths. The WHO has since announced plans in response to the increase.

World Malaria Day takes place annually on 25 April. As part of World Malaria Day, health organisations and scientists come together to discuss methods for tackling the disease and to raise awareness through public educational programs, charity events and community activities. In 2019, World Malaria Day is taking place under the theme 'zero malaria starts with me', with the aim of empowering individuals across the world to make a "personal commitment to saving millions more lives" and help communities and economies to "thrive" by eradicating the disease.<sup>3</sup>

### What is Malaria?

Malaria is a life-threatening but preventable disease caused by *Plasmodium* parasites that are transmitted to people through the bites of infected female *Anopheles* mosquitoes. There are five parasite species that cause malaria in humans, with two of these species—*P. falciparum* and *P. vivax*—posing the greatest threat.

### Prevention and Treatment

To prevent transmission of the disease, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends antimalarial drugs and disease control programmes (vector control), adding that two forms of vector control—insecticide-treated mosquito nets and indoor residual spraying—are "effective in a wide range of circumstances".<sup>4</sup> The organisation also states that early diagnosis and treatment of malaria "reduces disease and prevents death", in addition to "reducing malaria transmission".<sup>5</sup> In particular, the "best available treatment" for *P. falciparum* malaria is artemisinin-based combination therapy (ACT), which is taken alongside a partner drug and used to reduce the number of parasites during the first three days of treatment.<sup>6</sup> In all suspected cases of malaria, the WHO recommends that malaria be first confirmed using parasite-based diagnostic testing before administering treatment.<sup>7</sup>

## World Malaria Day: Origins and Purpose

World Malaria Day originated from Africa Malaria Day, a continent-wide event held by African governments since 2001. In May 2007, at the 60th session of the World Health Assembly (the decision-making body of the WHO), it was proposed that Africa Malaria Day be changed to World Malaria Day “for recognising the global effort to provide effective control of malaria”.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the purpose of the day has been to raise awareness of the global effort to control and ultimately eradicate malaria. Consequently, the ‘zero malaria’ theme for 2019 plans to engage:

- political leaders who control government policy decisions and budgets;
- private sector companies that will benefit from a malaria-free workforce; and
- communities affected by malaria, whose buy-in and ownership of malaria control interventions is critical to success.<sup>9</sup>

The day is also an “occasion to highlight the need for continued investment and sustained political commitment for malaria control and elimination”.<sup>10</sup> As part of this, World Malaria Day provides health organisations and scientists with an opportunity to “communicate information” about the disease and about current research efforts through public educational programs, charity events and community activities.<sup>11</sup>

## Global Malaria Action Plan

World Malaria Day also brings together international agencies and research institutions to discuss the progress of the [Global Malaria Action Plan](#), published in September 2018, which provides a “global framework for action around which partners can coordinate their efforts”.<sup>12</sup> The action plan comprises of a three-part strategy focusing on control and elimination of malaria, and research into it. The action plan was developed by the Roll Back Malaria Partnership and endorsed at the Millennium Development Goals Malaria Summit in New York City, USA, on 25 September 2008.

In addition, members of the World Health Assembly, such as the UK, have sought to eradicate malaria in line with targets set out in the *Global Technical Strategy for Malaria 2016–2030*, which was developed in “close alignment” with the action plan.<sup>13</sup>

## Goals, Milestones and Targets

A global strategy was adopted by members of the World Health Assembly in May 2015. The strategy, *Global Technical Strategy for Malaria 2016–2030*, states that to combat malaria worldwide, an annual investment of US\$6.4 billion is needed by 2020 to meet the first milestone. It was developed under the guidance of a steering committee comprised of “leading malaria technical experts, scientists and country representatives” and was overseen by the Malaria Policy Advisory Committee.<sup>14</sup> The aims of the strategy are outlined in table 1.

**Table 1: Goals, Milestones and Targets for Combatting Malaria for World Health Assembly Member Countries**

Goals	Milestones		Targets
	2020	2025	2030
Reducing malaria mortality rates globally compared with 2015	At least 40%	At least 75%	At least 90%
Reducing malaria case incidence globally compared with 2015	At least 40%	At least 75%	At least 90%
Eliminate malaria from countries in which malaria was transmitted in 2015	At least 10 countries	At least 20 countries	At least 35 countries
Prevent re-establishment of malaria in all countries that are malaria-free	Re-establishment prevented	Re-establishment prevented	Re-establishment prevented

(World Health Organisation, [Background Brief on the Proposed Targets and Estimated Costs of Implementation of the Draft Global Technical Strategy for Malaria \(2016–2030\)](#), 19 December 2014)

The strategy is also built on three pillars which “guide global efforts to move closer to malaria elimination”.<sup>15</sup> These are outlined below:

- Pillar 1: Ensure universal access to malaria prevention, diagnosis and treatment.
- Pillar 2: Accelerate efforts towards elimination and attainment of malaria-free status.
- Pillar 3: Transform malaria surveillance into a core intervention.<sup>16</sup>

### **What Progress Has Been Made?**

One of the key milestones of the strategy for 2020 is the elimination of malaria in at least ten countries that were malaria endemic in 2015. According to the WHO’s *World Malaria Report 2018*, at the current rate of progress, it is “likely” that this milestone will be reached.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, it had identified 21 countries that had the “potential to eliminate malaria by 2020” and was working with the governments in these countries to “support their elimination acceleration goals”.<sup>18</sup> Of the 21 countries identified, eleven remained “on track” to achieve their elimination goals; however, the other ten countries have all reported increases in indigenous malaria cases in 2017 compared to 2016.

In relation to reducing malaria deaths and disease by at least 40% by 2020, the report revealed that not only is the global trend “off track”, but all indications reveal that these targets are “unlikely” to be achieved, with analysis of cases indicating that progress has stalled between 2015 and 2017.<sup>19</sup> It stated that in 2017, there were an estimated 219 million cases of malaria worldwide, which is an increase on the 217 million cases in 2016. Worldwide, approximately 435,000 people died from malaria globally in 2017, compared with 451,000 deaths in 2016.<sup>20</sup>

*P. falciparum* accounted for 99.7% of estimated malaria cases in Africa in 2017, with the region carrying a “a disproportionately high share of the global malaria burden”.<sup>21</sup> *P. falciparum* also accounted for the majority of cases in South-East Asia (62.8%), the Eastern Mediterranean (69%) and the Western Pacific (71.9%).<sup>22</sup> In contrast, *P. vivax* is the predominant parasite in the Americas, representing 74.1% of malaria cases.<sup>23</sup>

In an interview in July 2018, before the WHO published its latest figures, Thomas Stewart from The MENTOR Initiative, a humanitarian organisation aiming to deliver disease control worldwide, noted a 20% increase in malaria deaths in eight countries in 2015–16. He went on to argue that more funding was required to tackle malaria, highlighting that, up to 2018, the world had invested US\$2.7 billion annually, which was just over 40% of the target identified in the strategy. He also argued that politically, the world needed “a change in focus”, shifting away from countries that were “easy wins” because they were “politically stable” to those countries in “protracted conflict” where people were “vulnerable and desperate for help but governments are either not providing it, or are just not able to meet the needs alone”.<sup>24</sup>

In response to the increase in the number of new cases of malaria worldwide, the WHO has since announced that it had launched a “high burden to high impact” response plan with the aim of “scaling up prevention, treatment and investment” to protect vulnerable people, and to reduce the number of deaths from malaria.<sup>25</sup>

## UK Government Policy

Malaria does not occur naturally in the United Kingdom, but travel-associated cases are reported for some people who have returned to the UK or arrived from malaria-endemic areas. An estimated 1,792 cases of imported malaria were reported in the United Kingdom in 2017.<sup>26</sup> This figure, from Public Health England (PHE), represented an increase of 174 cases (from 1,618) on the previous year. Of the 1,792 cases of imported malaria in 2017, approximately 1,452 cases were caused by *P. falciparum*, with 164 cases caused by the *P. vivax* parasite.<sup>27</sup> PHE also reported that there were six deaths from malaria in 2017, which is the same number of deaths as in 2015 and in 2016. To reduce incidents of malaria coming into the UK, the Advisory Committee on Malaria Prevention advises that travellers use “effective [mosquito] bite prevention” as a “first line of defence”.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the taking of antimalarials is also advised. However, Public Health England notes that the type of antimalarial drug taken should be dependent on the individual (and their clinical and medical history) and the destination.<sup>29</sup>

The UK also contributes to the global fight against malaria. In a speech at the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in London on 16 April 2018, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, called on leaders of the Commonwealth to join the UK in pledging to halve malaria by 2023. She stated that the UK “remains committed to its five-year pledge, made in 2016, to spend half a billion pounds a year tackling malaria”.<sup>30</sup> Mrs May noted that the figure for 2018 included £100 million that would be matched by partners in the private sector.

In the same month, the Government announced that it was committing £9.2 million of research funding to develop “two new safe and effective malaria treatments”, and was committing £50 million towards a programme for malaria control in Nigeria.<sup>31</sup> The Department for International Development (DFID) had also allocated £89 million between 2008 and 2016 to support the national malaria programme in Nigeria, which is tasked with fighting malaria and strengthening health systems. According to the Malaria Consortium, this has resulted in an estimated 48,000 lives saved over the course of the programme.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, the Government outlined some of the UK’s work to fight against malaria:

- Since 2011, DFID has distributed 49.7 million long-lasting, insecticide-treated bed nets, which it estimates has saved up to 808,000 lives.
- In September 2016, DFID pledged £1.1 billion to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria over the next three years. It has been estimated that the global

fund has saved 2.2 million lives and averted 50 million new infections from malaria, tuberculosis and HIV.

- It is believed that UK-funded research that supported the development of child-friendly malaria drugs has now been used for more than 350 million treatments in malaria-endemic countries.<sup>33</sup>

However, Alison Evans, who was the chair of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, has criticised DFID's efforts to tackle malaria, arguing that "mounting pressure" on staff in the department had "somewhat translated its priorities, at times, into a set of best buys that it can deliver safely and well", such as the purchase of mosquito nets. She argued:

DFID has always maintained a very clear focus on delivering aid well. But I do think it has somewhat translated its priorities, at times, into a set of best buys that it can deliver safely and well, but that aren't always understood in terms of the agenda of transformative change.

[It has gone for] low-hanging fruit and a lot of isolated, intervention-specific support, such as treatment for malaria, bed nets, family planning commodities [...] All really important, but the strategic wrapper around that, saying "and this is how we are also going to ensure that this bundle of interventions works together in a way that really moves [a country] in a positive direction" seems to have been lost slightly.<sup>34</sup>

### Further Information

- Roll Back Malaria Partnership to End Malaria, '[World Malaria Day 2019](#)', accessed 10 April 2019

- <sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation, [World Malaria Report 2018](#), November 2018, p 60.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p 60.
- <sup>3</sup> Roll Back Malaria Partnership to End Malaria, '[Paris to Serve as Host City for World Malaria Day 2019](#)', accessed 29 March 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> World Health Organisation, '[Malaria](#)', accessed 20 March 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> World Health Organisation, '[Artemisinin Resistance and Artemisinin-Based Combination Therapy Efficacy](#)', August 2018, p 2.
- <sup>7</sup> World Health Organisation, '[Malaria](#)', accessed 20 March 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> World Health Organisation, '[World Malaria Day](#)', 25 April 2013.
- <sup>9</sup> World Health Organisation, '[World Malaria Day 2019](#)', accessed 1 April 2019.
- <sup>10</sup> United Nations, '[World Malaria Day: Call to Close Gaps in Prevention and Treatment to Defeat Malaria](#)', 24 April 2015.
- <sup>11</sup> World Health Organisation, '[World Malaria Day 2019](#)', accessed 1 April 2019.
- <sup>12</sup> Roll Back Malaria Partnership to End Malaria, '[The Global Malaria Action Plan](#)', September 2008, p 12.
- <sup>13</sup> World Health Organisation, '[Global Technical Strategy for Malaria 2016–2030](#)', accessed 20 March 2019.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> World Health Organisation, '[Global Technical Strategy for Malaria 2016–2030](#)', 17 June 2015, p 9.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> World Health Organisation, '[World Malaria Report 2018](#)', November 2018, p xvii.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p 52.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p 60.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> World Health Organisation, '[Factsheet: Malaria](#)', 27 March 2019.
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Thomas Locke, '[Five Minutes with Thomas Stewart](#)', Fight Malaria Blog, 22 July 2018.
- <sup>25</sup> United Nations News, '[UN Health Agency Launches Action Plan As Global Malaria Cases Rise](#)', 19 November 2018.
- <sup>26</sup> Public Health England, '[Malaria Imported into the United Kingdom: 2017](#)', 5 July 2018, p 6.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Public Health England, '[Guidelines for Malaria Prevention in Travellers From the UK: 2018](#)', 29 January 2019, p 21.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Prime Minister's Office, '[PM to Pledge Commitment to Education and Fighting Malaria in Wide-Reaching Commonwealth Speech](#)', 16 April 2018.
- <sup>31</sup> Department for International Development, '[The UK Announces Further Support in the Fight Against Malaria](#)', 17 April 2018.
- <sup>32</sup> House of Commons International Development Committee, '[DFID's Programme in Nigeria](#)', 19 July 2016, HC 110 of session 2016–17, p 43.
- <sup>33</sup> Prime Minister's Office, '[PM to Pledge Commitment to Education and Fighting Malaria in Wide-Reaching Commonwealth Speech](#)', 16 April 2018.
- <sup>34</sup> DevEx, '[Q&A: ICAI's Alison Evans on the State of UK Aid](#)', January 2019.

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