

## SEASONAL DISEASES

## Malaria - Highlights from the WHO World Malaria Report, 2021

As 2021 draws to a close, the latest World Malaria Report from the WHO contains interesting information about one of the world's major public health problems, mainly reflecting 2020 data. The global burden of malaria increased to 241 million in 2020 from 227 million in 2019. Most of the increase was in countries in the WHO African Region, which bears 95% of the world's burden of malaria cases. Six countries (Nigeria, DRC, Uganda, Mozambique, Angola, and Burkina Faso) currently account for over half of all malaria cases and deaths. While the malaria mortality rate reduced by 63% between 2000 and 2019 from 150 to 56/100 000, it rose in 2020 to 62/100 000 population at risk.

Despite worst-case scenario fears about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on malaria, in most cases disruptions were moderate, and most malaria-endemic countries maintained essential malaria services.

The emergence of partial resistance to artemisinin drugs in the WHO African Region is a major concern, although artemisinin-based combinations are presently still effective. A priority is to improve surveillance of treatment efficacy and genotypical markers of resistance; the NICD's Antimalarial Resistance

Monitoring and Malaria Operational Research Lab is providing this service in South Africa.

After several years of evaluation studies of the RTS,S/AS01 malaria vaccine, including large-scale introduction in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi, the WHO recommended that the vaccine be used in children living in regions with moderate to high malaria transmission. This does not apply to South Africa and other low-transmission southern African countries.

From the diagnostic aspect, deletions in the *Plasmodium falciparum* parasite's *pfhrp2/3* genes makes them undetectable by the usual rapid diagnostic tests, which are based on detecting histidine-rich protein 2 (HRP2). There are limited alternatives, and therefore the WHO has called for urgent action to address increasing prevalence of *pfhrp2* deletions in endemic countries, particularly in the Horn of Africa. They have been confirmed in DRC, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Ghana, Sudan, Uganda, and Tanzania. To date, the NICD's surveillance has not detected any *pfhrp2* deletions in South African malaria parasites.

The full report is available online: <https://www.who.int/teams/global-malaria-programme>