

450 million Africans threatened by spinal meningitis

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Spinal meningitis, which can kill in 24 hours, poses a threat to 450 million Africans this year, according to medical experts from eight of the continent's countries.

Meningococcal [meningitis](#) is a global burden that affects 1.2 million people every year and causes the death of 135,000 of them, said the doctors from west and central Africa.

Twenty-six [countries](#) that make up the so-called "African meningitis belt that stretches from Senegal to Ethiopia—an area home to 450 million people—may be heavily affected by epidemic outbreaks," said the doctors at a press conference.

"Meningitis is still a problem, we must react to avoid tragedy," said Dr Elia Gilbertnair, a medic at pharmaceutical giant Sanofi which organised the conference.

Dr Gilbertnair added that countries don't make calls for stockpiles of meningitis vaccines until the last moment, when an epidemic is declared.

Mali's Professor Mamadou Keita Marouf called for a mass vaccination programme to help prevent the disease responsible for "practically decimating a generation".

Professor Ye Ouattara Diarra, from Burkina Faso, described meningitis as a public health problem and called for increased monitoring to help

detect cases early.

The World Health Organization (WHO) warned in December of a risk of fresh meningitis outbreaks this year in Africa, particularly Niger and Nigeria which were both badly hit in 2015.

Meningitis is an acute inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord and can be life-threatening.

Symptoms include high fever, a stiff neck, vomiting and severe headaches.

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