

Countrywide shortage of children vaccines bites on

Wanjiku has faced unprecedented challenges over the past two weeks as she searched for immunization for her 12-month-old twins. Despite visiting multiple health facilities, including the Level 5 Mama Lucy Kibaki Hospital in Embakasi West, she was unable to find a single dose of the Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine, essential for preventing tuberculosis in children. Returning to the hospital on Monday, as instructed, proved futile as the vaccines were still unavailable.

"If I get money, I will seek this service in a private hospital," she lamented, her hopes of securing the jab in a public health facility diminishing. Wanjiku's journey spanned various health centers across Makadara, Embakasi, and Kamukunji sub-counties, all without success. Meanwhile, she clings to the hope that her babies will be immunized soon. The vaccine shortage in Nairobi is not isolated, with tetanus and polio vaccines also unavailable for the past four months, a situation blamed on the government's debt to a global supplier.



"We have not had vaccines for months now," admitted a senior healthcare worker at Mama Lucy hospital, speaking anonymously. Similarly, at the Mowlem Health Centre, another anonymous healthcare worker confirmed that the facility had not received polio and BCG vaccines since the end of January. The BCG vaccine is critical for preventing TB among infants.

"I can't imagine a baby contracting tuberculosis because there are no BCG jabs," said a senior government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to his current position but had previously served in a crucial department at the Ministry of Health.

"If I were still in the department, I would do all I can to ensure we have the life-saving vaccines," he said, acknowledging the unprecedented vaccine shortage in Kenya.

Dr. Michael Lusiola, CEO of Kenya Biovax Institute (KBI), announced that local vaccine production would prioritize infant vaccines when operations begin in 2029. The Fill & Finish operations starting in 2027 will also prioritize children's vaccines. Health Cabinet Secretary Susan Nakhumicha confirmed the shortages, attributing them to an unpaid debt of between Sh1.5 billion to Sh2 billion to a global supplier. "Yes, we have a challenge, but it's being worked on," Nakhumicha assured, adding that she had contacted the National Treasury to address the issue urgently.

The vaccines under the Kenya Expanded Programme on Immunization (KEPI) are supplied by UNICEF and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. "It has come to our attention that counties also need to order," Nakhumicha said, noting the ministry's caution to prevent a total vaccine stock-out. The shortage affects vaccines for tuberculosis, measles, polio, rotavirus, and tetanus, essential for protecting against six childhood killer diseases.

The National Vaccines Initiative Programme (NVIP) indicated that the shortage resulted from the government's failure to pay UNICEF for supplies. Acting Director General for Health, Dr. Patrick Amoth, confirmed that the annual ceiling of Sh596 million (\$4.5 million) for vaccines had not been met, leading to supply cessation. Vaccines listed for routine immunization in Kenya include BCG for tuberculosis, Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV), Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV), Rotavirus vaccine, DPT for diphtheria, whooping cough, and tetanus, Measles Rubella, pneumococcal vaccine, oral cholera vaccine, HPV for cervical cancer, malaria vaccine, and yellow fever vaccine.

The Centre for Behaviour Change and Communication (CBCC) is partnering with UNICEF on an immunization program targeting 31 counties, including Mombasa, Lamu, Taita-Taveta, Meru, Tharaka-Nithi, Embu, Kitui, Machakos, Makueni, Nyandarua, Nyeri, Kirinyaga, Murang'a, Kiambu, Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, Elgeyo-Marakwet, Nandi, Laikipia, Nakuru, Kericho, Bomet, Kakamega, Vihiga, Busia, Siaya, Kisumu, Homa Bay, Migori, Kisii, and Nyamira. The program supports a multimedia vaccine campaign targeting caregivers and adolescents to promote primary health care.

Health advocates under the Health NGO Network (HENNET) and other civil society organizations, including Stop TB Partnership Kenya, have raised concerns with the Ministry of Health about the vaccine shortage. A letter from HENNET's executive director, Dr. Margaret Lubale, highlighted the urgent need to address the potential outbreak of measles and the alarming reports of vaccine stock-outs for routine immunization antigens like BCG, Rota, and OPV.

The stakeholders urged the ministry to expedite the procurement and distribution of measles vaccines to replenish stocks and ensure uninterrupted vaccination programs. They warned that insufficient budget allocation for immunization could jeopardize the National Vaccine Immunization Program (NVIP)'s ability to procure vaccines timely, affecting the Ministry of Health's campaign efforts. The vaccination program relies heavily on funding from GAVI and other partners.

By Morara Kebaso