

Public Assured of Safety, Efficacy of Malaria Drugs

The National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP) has assured the public that the artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs) used for the treatment of uncomplicated malaria in the country is safe and efficacious.

The assurance comes in the wake of reports that malaria parasites resistant to key drugs have spread rapidly in South East Asia.

According to the BBC report, the parasites have moved from Cambodia to Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, where half of patients were not being cured by first-choice drugs.

Malaria is caused by plasmodium parasites transmitted by the Anopheles mosquitoes. According to entomologists, there are five species of the parasite that cause malaria and over 40 species of the Anopheles mosquito that are vectors of the disease.

Mosquito Day

August 20 is celebrated as World Mosquito Day. The day was first established in 1897 when the link between mosquitoes and malaria transmission was discovered by a British doctor, Sir Ronald Ross.

The day is aimed at raising awareness of the causes of malaria and how it can be prevented. It is also used to raise funds for research into the cure of malaria.

It also offers an opportunity to celebrate the work done by scientists the world over and their achievements in malaria control.

Efficacy

In an interview with the Programme Manager of the NMCP, Dr Keziah Malm, said the country had been monitoring the resistance of the parasites to artesunate-amodiaquine and artemether-lumefantrine.

"The efficacy of these drugs is about 96 -99 per cent and so we are fine and nowhere near drug resistance. No one should panic because there is a monitoring system in

place all the time and if there is a reduction in the efficacy of the drugs we can easily pick it up and put in measures to address it", she stressed.

Additionally, Dr Malm said the antimalarial dihydroartemisininpiperaquine used in South East Asia was the alternative drug choice for Ghana and so had not been extensively used in the country, thereby, reducing the drug pressure on it and also minimising the risk of resistance.

She said the programme had started monitoring dihydroartemisininpiperaquine this year as well.

Drugs resistance

Dr Malm explained that most of the time drug resistance had to do with drug pressure, meaning that when you use it a lot, it contributes to risk of resistance.

She said other factors that contribute to the risk of drug resistance development were one not completing the full course for a medication or taking medicine when it was not needed; poor quality of the medicines and inadequate surveillance of the efficacy and sensitivity of the medicines.

She said the key thing that would be helpful in ensuring that the country did not develop resistance strains was for every Ghanaian to make sure that testing for malaria confirmation was done before treatment.

She added that one must finish the full dosage during treatment and not stop midway.

Monitoring

A Senior Research Fellow of the Department of Epidemiology of the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (NMIMR), Dr Benjamin Abuaku, who corroborated the NMCP's position, said the institute had 10 sentinel sites across the country from where it monitored the efficacy of the antimalarials for the treatment of uncomplicated malaria.

He said the data available showed artesunate-amodiaquine had an efficacy of 99.2 per cent, while artemether-lumefantrine had 96.0 per cent.

Dr Abuaku, therefore said there was no cause for alarm and that the sites were still collecting data and that another round of collection will end this year.

Malaria burden

Although malaria remains a major health problem, progress has been made to reduce disease and death due to malaria especially in children under five years and pregnant women.

In 2018 the country recorded approximately 11 million suspected malaria cases which represented about 34.5 per cent of Out Patient Department (OPD) Cases. A total of 428 deaths attributable to malaria were recorded.

In 2005 Ghana changed its antimalaria drug policy from chloroquine to artemisinin-based combination therapies (ACTs) as the first line drug for the management of uncomplicated malaria.

Source - Daily Graphic