

Malaysia declared free from polio by WHO



Khairy Jamaludin Abu Bakar

Malaysia was declared free from polio by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Friday (Sept. 9, 2021).

Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar said the WHO Representative Office to Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Singapore made the announcement in its official message to the ministry on Sept 10.

He said the declaration came following a comprehensive assessment of polio control and prevention measures carried out in Malaysia by an evaluation team consisting of a panel of international experts.

"Based on the assessment, Malaysia's efforts in the control and prevention of the disease have been recognised as successful in ending the spread of polio," he said in a statement today (Sept. 12, 2021).

Polio, or poliomyelitis is an infectious disease caused by the polio virus that attacks the human nervous system and can cause irreversible, lifelong paralysis. In some cases, the illness can also cause respiratory failure and be fatal.

There is no cure for the disease, and it can only be prevented with oral and injectable vaccines. Malaysia was previously declared polio-free in 2000 where the last polio case occurred in 1992.

After 27 years of being polio-free, the country reported its first case on Dec 8, 2019, linked to a three-month-old Malaysian boy from Tuaran, in East Malaysian state of Sabah, who was admitted into a hospital's Intensive Care Unit after experiencing fever and weakness of limbs. The child was confirmed to be infected with the vaccine-derived poliovirus type 1 (VDPV1).

Khairy Jamaludin said following the confirmation of the case, polio prevention and control efforts were in full swing, and continued although the country was hit with the Covid-19 pandemic. Among other measures, he said the health ministry stepped up efforts to detect polio cases through Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP) surveillance nationwide.

"In this surveillance activity, each case of AFP among children under the age of 15 years was taken with stool samples to detect the polio virus."

From Jan 1, 2019 to Sept 9, 2021, Khairy Jamaludin said a total of 426 AFP cases were reported nationwide. Of the total, he said four cases were confirmed polio involving children aged 3 months, 3 years, 8 years and 11 years in Sabah.

The last case began to experience symptoms of paralysis on Jan 18, 2020, he said, adding that these confirmed cases of polio were found to have no or incomplete polio immunisation. Khairy Jamaludin said the ministry also carried out wastewater sampling to detect the presence of polio virus in the environment.

He said from Jan 1, 2019 to Sept 9, 2021, a total of 1,124 wastewater samples were taken nationwide and polio virus was detected in 25 wastewater samples taken in Sabah, as well as one wastewater sample taken in Labuan.

The last positive environmental sample for the polio virus was detected on July 1, 2020. He said the ministry through the State Health Department had also conducted a Polio Immunisation Campaign to stop the spread of the virus and prevent the occurrence of polio cases. "The campaign in Sabah has been implemented in stages from Dec 27, 2019, to Jan 20, 2021, involving the provision of oral polio vaccine (OPV) to children under 13 years state wide. "Two doses of bivalent oral polio vaccine type 1 and 3 (bOPV) and two doses of monovalent oral polio vaccine type 2 (mOPV2) were administered through the mouth. "Through this polio immunisation campaign, 809,261 children had received two doses of bOPV vaccine, while 784,062 children received two doses of mOPV2 vaccine."

Additionally, Khairy Jamaludin said polio immunisation through the National Immunisation Programme (NIP) was continued nationwide to ensure every child gets optimal protection from the infection.

"Polio immunisation was administered through the five-component vaccine, DTaP-IPV/Hib (which contains a polio antigen component) to children at the ages of 2, 3, 5 and 18 months.

"At the end of 2020 there was a slight change in the NIP schedule where the five-component vaccine was converted to a six-component vaccine (DTaP-IPV/HepB/Hib).

He also thanked the international organisations involved, including WHO, United Nations Children's Fund and the Global Polio Eradication Initiative who assisted Malaysia in controlling polio. -

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