

A new report by the World Health Organisation has shown that the global tally of malaria cases reached 247 million in 2021, compared to 245 million in 2020 and 232 million in 2019.

The report tagged 'World malaria report 2022' showed that despite the continued impact of COVID-19, malaria cases and deaths remained stable in 2021.

The new data noted that countries around the world largely held the line against further setbacks to malaria prevention, testing, and treatment services in 2021.

According to this year's world malaria report, there were an estimated 619,000 malaria deaths globally in 2021 compared to 625,000 in the first year of the pandemic. In 2019, before the pandemic struck, the number of deaths stood at 568,000.

"Following a marked increase in malaria cases and deaths in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, malaria-affected countries redoubled their efforts and were able to mitigate the worst impacts of Covid-related disruptions to malaria services," said WHO Director-General, Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus.

"We face many challenges, but there are many reasons for hope. By strengthening the response, understanding and mitigating the risks, building resilience, and accelerating research, there is every reason to dream of a malaria-free future," he added.

In 2020, more insecticide treated bednets (ITNs) – the primary defense in most malaria-endemic countries – were distributed than in any year on record.

And distributions in 2021 were strong overall, similar to pre-pandemic levels.

However, Benin, Eritrea, Indonesia, Nigeria, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Uganda, and Vanuatu distributed less than 60 per cent of their ITNs and Botswana, Central African Republic, Chad, Haiti, India, Pakistan and Sierra Leone did not dispense any.

In 2021, seasonal malaria chemoprevention – a highly effective, community-based intervention – reached nearly 45 million children in 15 African countries, which was a substantial increase from 33.4 million in 2020 and 22.1 million in 2019.

And despite supply chain and logistical challenges during COVID, a record number of rapid diagnostic malaria tests were distributed to health facilities in 2020.

An estimated 242 million artemisinin-based combination therapy – the most effective treatment for *P. falciparum* malaria – were delivered worldwide in 2021 compared to 239 million in 2019.

Despite successes, challenges continued and led the statistical field, particularly in Africa, which shouldered about 95 per cent of cases and 96 per cent of deaths worldwide in 2021.

Disruptions during the pandemic and converging humanitarian crises, health system challenges, restricted funding, rising biological threats and a decline in the effectiveness of core disease-cutting tools, threatened the global response.

“Despite progress, the African region continues to be hardest hit by this deadly disease”, said WHO Regional Director for Africa Matshidiso Moeti, noting that new tools and the funding to deploy them are “urgently needed to help us defeat malaria”.

Malaria funding in 2021 stood at \$3.5 billion, an increase from the two previous years but well below the estimated \$7.3 billion required globally to stay on track.

At the same time, a decline in the effectiveness of key malaria control tools, most crucially ITNs, is impeding further progress against malaria.

Among the threats are insecticide resistance, insufficient access, and loss of ITNs due to the stresses of daily use outpacing replacement.

Other rising risks involve parasitic mutations affecting rapid diagnostic tests; growing parasite resistance to malaria drugs; and an invasion of an insecticide-resistant mosquito.

For African countries to build a more resilient response, WHO recently launched a strategy curbing antimalarial drug resistance and an initiative stopping the spread of the *Anopheles stephensi* malaria vector.

Additionally, a new global framework to respond to malaria in urban areas, developed jointly by WHO and UN-Habitat, provides guidance for city leaders and malaria stakeholders.