

Challenges to Introducing Rotavirus Vaccines in Asia

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Rotavirus is the commonest cause of severe diarrhoea in young children under 5 years of age and remains a leading cause of child mortality in this age group. It is a double-stranded RNA virus with different strains serotyped according to G and P structural proteins. A number of rotavirus vaccines have been licensed following studies demonstrating efficacy in both developed and developing countries. Countries that have introduced these vaccines into their national immunisation programmes have witnessed dramatic reductions in both rotavirus and all cause gastroenteritis admissions. In addition, these vaccines may confer indirect protection to unvaccinated adults and older children as well as reduce the risk of nosocomial infections. There are also unanticipated benefits of vaccination such as reduction in rotavirus-related convulsions. Rotavirus vaccines have been associated with a very small risk of intussusception, but the health benefits of rotavirus vaccines far outweigh this risk. The World Health Organization recommends that rotavirus vaccines be included in all national immunisation programmes and, as of June 2015, 78 countries have done so. However despite a strong evidence-base of cost-effectiveness and real world impact, relatively few Asian countries are routinely using these vaccines. Reasons for slow uptake of rotavirus vaccines in Asia could include faulty perceptions of low disease burden, concerns about vaccine safety or vaccine suitability and assumptions of high vaccine price. Further efforts are required to inform the public, medical practitioners, key opinion leaders, public health officials and government decision-makers of the potential for rotavirus vaccines to have a positive impact on child health in the region.