



FEDERAL MINISTRY OF HEALTH

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs)
Control/Elimination/Eradication Program

NIGERIA MAKES A RECORD-BREAKING DECISION THAT FREES NEARLY 18.9 MILLION PEOPLE FROM RIVER BLINDNESS TREATMENT

Today, Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Health announced a record-breaking stop treatment decision that frees nearly 18.9 million Nigerians in four states from the ancient and debilitating disease, river blindness. This is the largest one-time achievement for river blindness globally. Overall, Nigeria has stopped river blindness treatment for over 28 million persons in ten states, more than any other country in the world.

Nigeria continues to register success in the fight against river blindness (onchocerciasis), a parasitic disease affecting 32 states and the FCT. Historically, more Nigerians are at risk for river blindness than in any other nation. The disease is caused by a worm parasite (*Onchocerca volvulus*) that is transmitted by the bites of small black fly vectors that breed in rapidly flowing rivers and streams.

Excellent progress to eliminate the transmission of river blindness, has been made over the last 30 years by the Federal Ministry of Health's National Onchocerciasis Elimination Programme and tens of thousands of dedicated community-based health workers, together with partners. The programme strategy is mass administration of the medicine (MAM) ivermectin (Mectizan®, donated by Merck & Co., Inc.) accompanied with health education. Since 2015, the Programme has been advised by the Nigeria Onchocerciasis Elimination Committee (NOEC), which is comprised of national and international experts and leaders. The NOEC is chaired by Prof. B.E.B. Nwoke, a professor at Imo State University. NOEC Chair Professor Nwoke said of this achievement, "I cannot express how gratifying it is to see millions of Nigerians free from the threat of river blindness. When we started, many questioned our ambition. Today, I'm proud that Nigeria, once again, serves as a beacon of inspiration not only for river blindness elimination globally but also for all the countries around the world working to eliminate neglected tropical diseases."

The 15th NOEC meeting, held 7 – 9 December 2022, reviewed results from Imo, Abia, Enugu and Anambra States, including molecular diagnostic testing of 52,187 black flies and 12,718 blood samples, overseen by expert teams and processed in a state-of-the-art in-country laboratory. All results were negative, and so met the World Health Organization's criteria for declaring these states to have interrupted onchocerciasis transmission. The NOEC recommended that ivermectin treatment for onchocerciasis stop among 18,885,773 people in the four states, although ivermectin/albendazole (donated by GSK) combined treatments for another parasitic disease, lymphatic filariasis (elephantiasis), should continue for 5,557,925 people.

Each of the four states now enter the next phase, post-treatment surveillance, and carefully monitor to ensure that river blindness has not returned before disease transmission can be considered eliminated in each respective state. The success in these four states, which are assisted by the US NGO The Carter Center, is **after 27 years of consistent ivermectin treatment over a period of 27 years.** The committee also recommended that transmission is suspected to have been interrupted in Sokoto, Yobe and Gombe states, meaning these states are eligible to conduct their own stop-MAM surveys in 2023. There after they will report results to the committee and deliberate whether a stop treatment decision can be recommended to the Federal Ministry of Health.

For Nigeria to request WHO verification of elimination of transmission, all states must demonstrate that they have eliminated transmission of river blindness.

The FMOH acknowledges the support of its partners, including Amen Health Care and Empowerment Foundation; UNICEF; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Christoffel Blinden Mission; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; The END Fund; Health and Development Support Programme; Helen Keller International; Merck & Co. Inc. and the Mectizan Donation Program; Mission To Save the Helpless; Sightsavers; The Carter Center; USAID's Act to End NTDs | East Program led by RTI International; and the World Health Organization."

