Copenhagen, 11 July 2017 - Ongoing measles outbreaks in the WHO European Region have caused 35 deaths in the past 12 months. The most recent fatality was a 6-year-old boy in Italy, where over 3300 measles cases and 2 deaths have occurred since June 2016. Several other countries have also reported outbreaks; according to national public health authorities, these have caused 31 deaths in Romania, 1 death in Germany and another in Portugal.

"Every death or disability caused by this vaccine-preventable disease is an unacceptable tragedy," says Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe. "We are very concerned that although a safe, effective and affordable vaccine is available, measles remains a leading cause of death among children worldwide, and unfortunately Europe is not spared. Working closely with health authorities in all European affected countries is our priority to control the outbreaks and maintain high vaccination coverage for all sections of the population."

The Region has been progressing towards measles elimination. A total of 37 countries have interrupted endemic transmission, according to the assessment of the Regional Verification Commission for Measles and Rubella Elimination based on 2015 reporting. However, remaining pockets of low immunization coverage allow the highly contagious virus to spread among those who choose not to vaccinate, do not have equitable access to vaccines or cannot be protected through vaccination due to underlying health conditions.

In response, several countries are adopting measures, such as school-entry checks, to increase coverage rates for routine vaccinations against measles and other diseases. WHO recommends that every eligible child receive 2 doses of measles-containing vaccine. It also encourages adults who are not fully immunized, or who are not sure of their immunity status, to get vaccinated.

In line with the Regional Director's call for intensified efforts, Romania conducted a nationwide campaign of enhanced routine immunization activities. Italy implemented outbreak control measures including notifying suspected cases, tracing contacts and offering post-exposure prophylaxis and vaccination.

On 21 June 2017 in Rome, Italy, experts from the WHO Regional Office for Europe contributed to a consultation with regional public health officials, representatives of the Italian Institute of Health (ISS), and measles and rubella laboratory officials. Together they decided on further strategies to improve vaccination coverage among adolescents, adults, vulnerable population groups and health-care workers. The range of identified activities includes strengthening disease surveillance and communication practices.

http://www.eurowho.int/en/media-centre/sections/press-releases/2017/measles-continues-to-spread-and-take-lives-in-europe