29 September 2017, Geneva: Periodic deworming programmes with a single-tablet treatment can drastically reduce the suffering of those infected with parasitic intestinal worms and protect the 1.5 billion people currently estimated to be at risk.

Four main species [1] of intestinal worms (also known as soil-transmitted helminths) affect almost a quarter of the world's poorest and mostly marginalized people. They are a major public health problem because the worms disrupt people's ability to absorb nutrients, impeding the growth and physical development of millions of children.

WHO has long promoted large-scale treatment for intestinal worms, but this is the first guideline approved by WHO's Guidelines Review Committee confirming that deworming improves the health and nutrient uptake of heavily infected children.

"There is now global evidence-based consensus that periodic, large-scale deworming is the best way to reduce the suffering caused by intestinal worms," says Dr Dirk Engels, Director of WHO's Neglected Tropical Diseases Department.

"These new guidelines have been issued at a time when countries where intestinal worms are endemic are accelerating control programmes with the help of partners – to both treat people who are infected and those at risk of infection."

Large-scale deworming programmes are facilitated by WHO, using medicines donated by Â pharmaceutical companies. WHO coordinates shipment of these medicines to countries requesting them. They are then distributed freely by national disease control programmes during mass treatment campaigns.

"Providing medicines to populations at risk reduces the intensity of intestinal helminth infections," said Dr Francesco Branca, Director of WHO's Department of Nutrition for Health and Development.

Deworming is not the only solution, however.

"Improving basic hygiene, sanitation, health education and providing access to safe drinking-water are also keys to resolving the health and nutritional problems caused by intestinal worms," says Dr Francesco Branca, Director of WHO's Department of Nutrition for Health and Development.
In 2015, just 39 per cent of the global population had access to safe sanitation, while 71 per cent could access safe water.

Treating school-age children for intestinal worms occurs in schools during "deworming days". Teachers supervise the process, freeing up health workers to focus on other demands.

Many countries combine deworming activities for pre-school children with other health campaigns, such as vaccination, child health and vitamin supplementation days.

"WHO aims to eliminate the harm caused by worm infections in children by 2020 by regularly treating at least 75% of the estimated 873 million children in areas where prevalence is high," says Dr Antonio Montresor, who heads WHO's global deworming programme. "In 2016, WHO Member States treated 63% of children requiring treatment. Now that the world has agreed standards for deworming at-risk populations, we are in a better position to reach this target."