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Accelerating access to rotavirus vaccines

Protection for the world's poorest countries

Editor's note: the Rotavirus Vaccine Program was active from 2003 to 2008.

Almost every child in the world has been infected with rotavirus, the most common cause of severe childhood diarrhea, by the age of three. In industrialized nations, where children with severe cases of rotavirus have ready access to health care, deaths due to rotavirus are rare. Globally, though, rotavirus kills hundreds of thousands of children every year—the overwhelming majority of whom live in developing countries, where lifesaving care can be hard to come by.

New oral vaccines can prevent severe cases of rotavirus. First introduced in the industrialized world in 2006, they are already making a tremendous impact. In the US, vaccines have reduced hospitalizations for severe rotavirus by as much as 80 percent. In Nicaragua, the first developing country to introduce the vaccines, 60 percent of severe cases have been averted. Hospital wards once crowded with critically dehydrated toddlers are now virtually empty ([watch a video about the unprecedented progress in Nicaragua](#)).

But as promising as these vaccines are, they



Every child gets rotavirus, so every child should be able to get the vaccine.

ROTAVIRUS VACCINE PROGRAM

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...the promising rotavirus vaccines are, they are not always available in the places where they are needed most. It can take a lot longer for vaccines to become available in the developing world—in the past, as long as 15 years. That's why we established the PATH Rotavirus Vaccine Program: to make rotavirus vaccines available where needed most, as rapidly as possible.

In June 2009, informed by the results of pivotal studies in Africa coordinated by PATH and our partners, the World Health Organization recommended that all national immunization programs include rotavirus vaccines. Developing countries got an even greater boost soon after, when the GAVI Alliance extended its commitment to support eligible countries in Africa and Asia in their plans to protect children from this common killer.

Why haven't people heard about rotavirus?

Although children have long suffered from it, rotavirus was only clinically discovered in 1973. It has taken many years to get a sound estimate on the burden of disease, and only now is a vaccine becoming a reality.

A vaccine represents the most promising method for preventing rotavirus infection. The virus is so contagious and resilient that simple measures like encouraging hand washing and providing clean water, so effective in curbing other diarrheal diseases, just don't work well enough.

Combining rotavirus vaccines within a broader approach that brings to bear all available tools—like oral rehydration therapy, breastfeeding, sanitation improvements, and zinc—gives



No child should die of diarrhea, and with rotavirus vaccines they don't have to. [Watch this video.](#)



Two-year-old Wilson was hospitalized with severe diarrhea—but recovered, thankfully.

caregivers a better chance at making a major impact. PATH works to reinvigorate broader diarrheal disease control efforts, promoting treatments and preventive measures that have fallen out of use despite their effectiveness.

Now newborns in Nicaragua receive a vaccine against rotavirus. [Read Wilson's story](#).

Photos, from top: Richard Lord, PATH/Teresa Guillien.

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