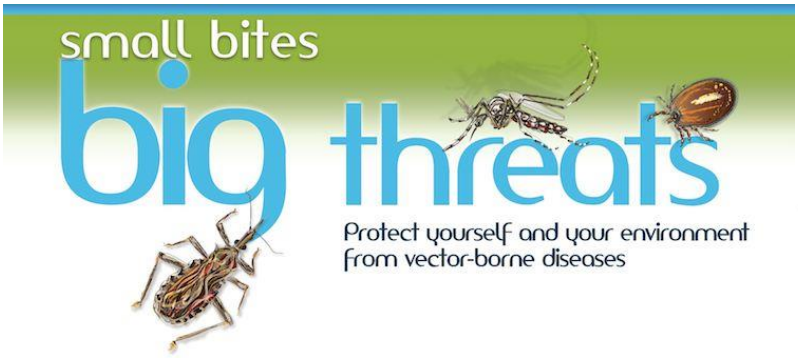

2014 APRIL 7 World Health Day

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Pan American Health Organization

World Health Organization
Regional Office for the Americas

Onchocerciasis is a parasitic disease caused by *Onchocerca volvulus*, which is transmitted to humans by black flies (genus *Simulium*). It can cause severe skin and eye disease, including blindness. It is commonly known as “river blindness” because the black fly vectors breed in fast-flowing rivers. Worldwide, an estimated 18 million people are infected and 270,000 blinded by the disease. Onchocerciasis is endemic in Africa, where it is a leading cause of preventable blindness. It also occurred in specific areas (foci) of six countries of the Americas—Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela—where it was introduced through the slave trade. As of July 2015, transmission has been eliminated in Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico, now to be considered formerly endemic countries, and has been interrupted or eliminated in 11 of the 13 original foci in the Americas. Today, only a few more than 20,000 people in Brazil and Venezuela remain in need of continual treatment. The antiparasitic drug ivermectin is donated to countries that require it by the global Mectizan® Donation Program of Merck. The minimum recommended coverage of biannual mass treatment with ivermectin has been maintained in the 13 foci of the Americas since 2002.

Key facts

- Blindness by onchocerciasis is considered as eliminated in the Americas since 1995.
- In 2013, Colombia became the first country in the world to achieve verific ation by WHO of the elimination of onchocerciasis transmission, followed by Ecuador in 2014 and Mexico in 2015.
- As of July 2015, there was evidence of elimination of transmission in the four foci in Guatemala.
- There is also evidence of elimination or interruption of transmission in two additional foci in Venezuela.
- In 2015, Guatemala submitted a dossier and request for verification of elimination of onchocerciasis to PAHO/WHO. The WHO International Verification Team is expected to visit Guatemala in 2016.
- Brazil and Venezuela are expected to be in a position to request verification later this decade.
- The Yanomami area of the Amazon region, shared by Brazil and Venezuela, is regarded as the greatest challenge for completing regional interruption of onchocerciasis transmission.

PAHO/WHO response

- In 1994, WHO Member States endorsed the mass distribution of ivermectin for onchocerciasis elimination and called for the development and dissemination of epidemiological methods for onchocerciasis evaluation and/or mapping in endemic countries.
- In 2008, PAHO/WHO Member States set the goal of interrupting onchocerciasis transmission by 2012 (CD48.R12), and this goal was ratified by the Member States in 2009 as one of a series of targets for eliminating neglected infectious diseases (CD49.R19).
- PAHO/WHO is an active partner in the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas (OEPA), a regional initiative sponsored by the Carter Center and supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USAID, Mectizan Donation Program, and other partners.

For more information, visit: www.paho.org/onchocerciasis

www.paho.org/WorldHealthDay2014