Uganda introduces new vaccine to fight cholera

BY FRANKLIN DRAKU
fdraku@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. Uganda has introduced a new drug to combat Rotavirus and other related diseases among infants.

Officials from the Ministry of Health yesterday said Rotavirus is one of the leading causes of cholera among children and that the introduction of the drug will go a long way in reducing infant mortality.

According to the Centres for Disease Control, Rotavirus is a contagious virus that can cause gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach and intestines).

Symptoms include severe diarrhea, often with vomiting, fever and abdominal pain.

Infants and children are the most at risk and can become severely dehydrated, which can lead to death if not attended to immediately.

Dr Bernard Odar, the Programme manager under Uganda National Expanded Programme on Immunisation, said the drugs are already in the country although they have not yet started administering them.

HOT SPOTS

Uganda has identified Nebbi, Pakwach, Hoima and Buliisa as cholera hotspots in the country.

He said the drugs will be administered to children at six and 10 months after birth.

"We shall supply the drugs to all infants freely to ensure that they are free from cholera related illnesses," he said.

He added that currently, the drugs are available in private health facilities but are too expensive for most of the parents.

Each dose of the drug in a private clinic costs about $100 (Shs360,000) but Dr Odar said the drugs will be free in government facilities.

He said although the drug will not be used to treat cholera, the vaccination will prevent Rotavirus, which is the main cause.

Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, the Minister of Health, said Uganda has reported cholera outbreaks annually for more than 50 years, yet the disease is preventable and treatable.

She said in the recent past, government has stepped-up interventions that have resulted in steady decline of cholera cases.

"The decline is not enough. I would like to see zero cholera cases reported from all districts because we know what causes cholera and how to prevent it using old and new tools," she said.

She said the ministry's focus is now on health promotion and disease prevention because it is cheaper to prevent disease than treat.

"In February, we shall introduce rotavirus vaccine for prevention of rotavirus diarrheal in children. We are also introducing oral cholera vaccine to complement provision of water, sanitation and hygiene," she said.

