

Pneumonia, a disease country glosses over

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UNICEF and WHO say India accounts for nearly 40% of global pneumonia cases. Most people are still in the dark about the illness

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Varalakshmi S, a mother of three, had not heard about pneumonia until her six-month-old child Darshan was diagnosed with the illness. When he started coughing and gasping for breath, she rushed him to a hospital.

After one-and-a-half months, the doctors at Kempegowda Institute of Medical Sciences told her that the baby was suffering from pneumonia.

She is one among the many of those who were not aware of pneumonia, the most under-recognised problem in India. According to UNICEF and WHO, India accounts for nearly 40% of global cases of pneumonia.

Speaking at a press conference organised by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, a US-based health portal, Dr Alagiriswamy Parthasarathy, former IAP (Indian Academy of Paediatrics) president, said pneumonia kills over 400,000 children under the age of five in India every year.

"About 30-40% of our outpatient wards



TACKLING PNEUMONIA: Dr Maturam Santhosham with Varalakshmi and Darshan at the press conference organised by John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

will have children suffering from pneumonia. Out of them, only 50% children get appropriate treatment," says Dr Prahlad Kumar A, associate professor, Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health.

Pneumonia is a preventable illness. "Established preventive techniques such as improv-

ing nutrition, exclusive breast feeding, reducing indoor air pollution and vaccinating against measles and pertussis (whooping cough) can successfully lower the risk of pneumonia among children," says Dr Maturam Santhosham, a paediatrician and professor at John Hopkins.

THE BRASS TACKS

The most common causes of severe pneumonia in children under the age of five in India are the bacteria pneumococcus and haemophilus influenzae type B (Hib).

Three million children die every year worldwide because of pneumonia.

Hib vaccination costs Rs400 in private hospitals. This vaccine will be available free of cost in government hospitals once it is included in the immunisation programme.

Keeping it at bay

Key prevention measures to reduce deaths due to pneumonia include promotion of adequate nutrition, risk modification and effective treatment.

In April 2008, the central government made a recommendation to all state governments to include Hib vaccination as a part of the state immunisation programme. Dr Jagadish Chinnappa, a paediatrician at Manipal Hospital, urged the government to take initiatives to give Hib vaccination to prevent pneumonia.