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Rotavirus vaccine cuts hospital visits for kids: study

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Rotavirus vaccines have helped drastically reduce hospital visits around the world, said a study out Thursday that urged more countries to administer the potentially life-saving shots to children.

Rotavirus can lead to fatal cases of diarrhea in children and causes half a million deaths in kids under five each year around the world. Developing countries are particularly at risk.

But the study published in the Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal said the number of severe cases can be massively cut if countries make the vaccine a routine part of children's doctor visits.

Since introducing the vaccine in 2006, the United States has seen a 58 to 86 percent reduction in such hospitalizations over three years, said the study.

In Australia, there was a bigger decline of 89 to 94 percent since 2007, and El Salvador saw a 69 to 81 percent drop in hospital visits among children under five.

Mexico, which introduced the vaccine in 2007, saw a 40 percent drop in diarrhea-related hospitalizations in 2009.

"These studies add to the growing body of evidence that shows rotavirus vaccines are safe, effective and most importantly, saving children's lives," said Anne Schuchat of the US Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC). "Unfortunately, too many children around the world get severely ill or die from this preventable disease. We must continue to expand our efforts to ensure that children around the world have access to these vaccines."

The World Health Organization in 2009 urged all countries to include rotavirus vaccines in their national immunization programs.

The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization said it is seeking four billion dollars from donors to help buy and distribute the rotavirus vaccine in needy nations.

"Rotavirus vaccines have enormous potential to save lives, and it is tragic that they are not more widely available to the children who need them most," said Helen Evans, interim chief executive officer of the GAVI Alliance.

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