

## US withdrawal from WHO raises fears for global health security

The United States has formally notified the World Health Organisation of its withdrawal, prompting serious concerns over the future of global health security. As a founding member, the US has historically contributed to some of WHO's greatest achievements, including the eradication of smallpox and progress against polio, HIV, Ebola, malaria, tuberculosis, and neglected tropical diseases.

In response, WHO expressed deep regret over the decision, warning that it makes both Americans and the world less safe. The organisation firmly rejected US claims that it is politicised, lacks independence, or mishandled the COVID-19 pandemic. WHO stated that it acted rapidly and transparently throughout the crisis, alerting the world as early as January 2020 and providing guidance based on the best scientific evidence. At no stage did WHO recommend lockdowns, vaccine mandates, or mask mandates, leaving decisions to national governments.

Experts warn that the withdrawal could slow progress on global health initiatives and weaken pandemic preparedness. WHO highlighted that ongoing reforms, including the newly adopted WHO Pandemic Agreement, are crucial for fair access to vaccines, diagnostics, and treatments worldwide.

Despite the US exit, WHO reaffirmed its commitment to all Member States, emphasising that health security is a shared responsibility and a fundamental human right. The agency hopes for the eventual return of the United States and stressed that global cooperation remains essential to tackle major health threats, both communicable and non-communicable, and to prevent future pandemics.

SOURCE: WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION



## UNITE, ACT, ELIMINATE Why world neglected tropical diseases day matters more than ever!

STAR HEALTH REPORT

World Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) Day, observed every year on 30 January, shines a spotlight on a group of preventable and treatable diseases that continue to affect the world's most vulnerable people. Despite major progress over the past decade, neglected tropical diseases still impact around one billion people globally, largely in underserved communities where poverty, limited healthcare access and poor living conditions persist.

NTDs include a wide range of conditions such as lymphatic filariasis, river blindness, schistosomiasis and leprosy. While diverse, they share a common feature: they thrive where health systems are weakest. The good news is that these diseases can be controlled, eliminated and, in some cases, eradicated. In 2024, around 1.4 billion people required interventions against NTDs, representing a 36 per cent reduction since 2010. This progress shows that sustained investment and coordinated action work.

As of early 2026, 58 countries have successfully eliminated at least one neglected tropical disease. This is a major milestone on the road to the World Health Organisation's ambitious target of 100 countries achieving elimination

by 2030. Country-led programmes, supported by international partners, have proven that elimination is achievable even in low-resource settings.

However, this hard-won progress is now under serious threat. The recent withdrawal of United States funding from neglected tropical disease programmes jeopardises nearly two decades of global investment. Between 2018 and 2023, aid for NTDs declined by 41%, making them one of the most underfunded areas in global health. This funding gap directly affects communities, delaying treatment, increasing disability and prolonging cycles of poverty.

Early reports shared with the WHO show that funding cuts have already delayed 47 mass treatment campaigns, preventing 143 million people from receiving medicines that would protect them from NTDs. Abrupt reductions in official development assistance have also halted critical research into new treatments, diagnostics and surveillance systems, undermining long-term global health security. WHO has warned that more than 70% of its country offices have reported health service disruptions linked to sudden funding suspensions, with NTD programmes among the most severely affected.

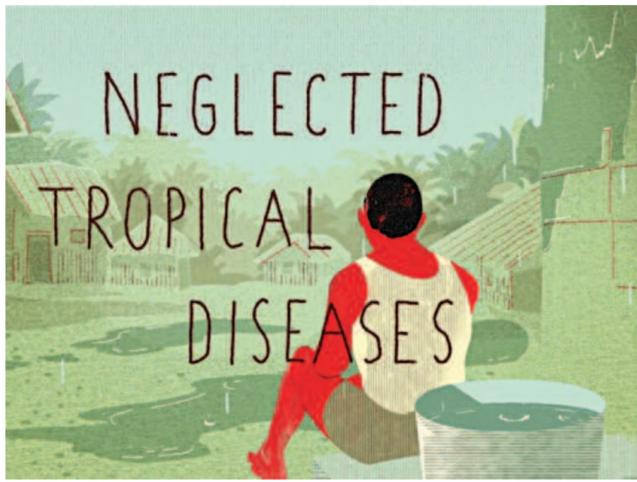
The challenge is not a lack of

solutions. Proven, low-cost tools already exist. Preventive chemotherapy, which involves the regular distribution of safe medicines, delivers an estimated 25 dollars in economic benefits for every dollar invested. Investments in diagnostics, surveillance and integrated health systems further strengthen the impact. What is needed now is political commitment, sustainable financing and stronger partnerships.

On World NTD Day 2026, the call to action is clear: unite, act and eliminate. Countries are urged to invest in domestically owned and financed NTD programmes that can be sustained over the long term. Development partners are encouraged to honour existing commitments, protect past achievements, unlock innovative financing and adopt new approaches that accelerate progress.

The World Health Organisation plays a central role in this effort by setting global strategies, coordinating partners, monitoring progress and supporting Member States in overcoming technical and operational challenges. With continued leadership and resources, NTD elimination remains one of the most achievable and equitable goals in global health.

SOURCE: WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION



## Adolescent health at a tipping point!

The health and wellbeing of the world's adolescents are at a critical turning point, according to a major new analysis published by The Lancet. Without urgent and targeted action, more than one billion young people aged 10 to 24 will still be living by 2030 in countries where preventable and treatable health problems threaten their futures.

The second Lancet Commission on adolescent health and wellbeing finds that progress over the past decade has been uneven. Encouragingly, global rates of smoking and alcohol use among adolescents have declined, and participation in education, particularly among young women, has increased. However, these gains are being overshadowed by rising mental health disorders and a sharp increase in overweight and obesity across all regions.



Mental health is a growing concern. By 2030, an estimated 42 million years of healthy life could be lost globally due to mental disorders and suicide among adolescents. At the same time, nearly one-third of adolescents in high-income regions, Latin America and the Middle East are expected to be overweight or obese, increasing the risk of long-term health problems.

The Commission highlights that today's adolescents are the first generation to grow up facing harsher climate conditions and constant exposure to digital technologies. Climate change, conflict and rapid digital transformation are creating new and complex threats to young people's physical and mental wellbeing.

Despite representing one quarter of the global population and carrying over 9% of the global disease burden, adolescents receive just 2.4% of global development aid. The Lancet calls for urgent investment, stronger leadership and meaningful youth participation, stressing that investing in adolescent health is essential for a healthier, more equitable and sustainable future.



## Leprosy in Bangladesh's tea gardens – the highest in the world

FAHMIDA RAHMAN

Rupan Bhumij (54), a tea-leaf plucker at Patrokhola Tea Garden in Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar district, was diagnosed with leprosy around 2020. Her symptoms began with white patches and small bumps on her face, which she assumed were boils or insect bites from working in the tea garden. The areas were neither itchy nor painful, so she did not initially suspect a serious illness. After about a week, she sought help from HEED Bangladesh, an organisation working on leprosy control in the Sylhet region. Medical tests confirmed leprosy, and with HEED's assistance she was admitted to Sylhet Leprosy Hospital, where she received inpatient treatment for over a month before continuing medication at home. Rupan's case was severe. Painful sores developed on her feet and soles, requiring special footwear. Even after treatment, she continues to suffer complications in both feet and her right hand. Loss of sensation means she cannot feel injuries to her feet, even when pierced by thorns, and winter worsens her condition. Persistent pain in her hand has forced her to stop plucking tea leaves altogether.

Another patient, Purnima Almik (13), daughter of a tea plantation worker at the same garden, noticed a small patch on her face nearly two years ago. Her family believed it was a birthmark. The patch slowly grew larger with no pain or itching. She was later diagnosed with leprosy at HEED Bangladesh.

Experts identify several factors behind the unusually high prevalence of leprosy in tea gardens: lack of awareness, delayed diagnosis, poor adherence to long-term medication, and deep-rooted poverty. Even after diagnosis, many patients fail to complete treatment.

Rupan still needs to continue medication for another year, but financial hardship prevents her from collecting free medicine from Sylhet Leprosy Hospital. She cannot travel alone and would need someone to accompany her. A round trip to Sylhet for two people costs at least 2,000 taka—far beyond her means. Purnima Almik's case illustrates this problem. After HEED identified her as a leprosy suspect, she was prescribed medication. When the facial patch began fading after a month, her family discouraged her from continuing treatment. Once she stopped, the disease progressed and the patch widened, forcing her to return for care.

Leprosy is not hereditary. It is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*, which primarily affects peripheral nerves. While it rarely causes death, delayed treatment can lead to lifelong disability. Early symptoms usually appear on the skin, making it easy to mistake leprosy for a harmless skin condition. Doctors note that leprosy and tuberculosis belong to the same bacterial family and spread through droplets from coughing or sneezing. Unlike tuberculosis, however, leprosy may take years to manifest symptoms.

Philip Gain, researcher and director of the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), emphasises that tea workers are among the most economically deprived communities in Bangladesh. Low wages, overcrowded housing, malnutrition, lack of quality healthcare, and limited awareness allow leprosy bacteria to spread undetected. He stresses that improving livelihoods—through fair wages, nutrition, medical services, and decent housing—is essential to controlling the disease in tea gardens.

The writer is a researcher at the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).

## Early detection breakthrough for women with dense breast tissue

Women with dense breast tissue face a higher risk of breast cancer and may not get full protection from standard mammograms, a new study shows. Dense breasts, which have relatively low levels of fatty tissue, can make it harder for x-rays to detect small tumours, meaning early-stage cancers may go unnoticed.

Researchers have long explored supplementary imaging methods such as ultrasound and MRI to improve cancer



detection in women with dense breasts. Now, a large trial in the UK has directly compared these approaches with contrast mammography in women whose regular mammograms showed no signs of cancer.

The phase 3 randomised controlled trial included over 9,000 women with dense breasts and negative mammograms.

The findings revealed that fast MRI and contrast mammography detected cancers in 1.7% and 1.9% of cases, respectively, while ultrasound detected only 0.4%. The study shows that these additional scans are more effective in spotting early-stage cancers that might otherwise be missed. Lead author Professor Fiona Gilbert from the University of Cambridge said the results could have implications beyond the UK for all countries using breast cancer screening.

SOURCE: THE LANCET

## Wearable tech revolution: Track your health 24/7

Accessing health metrics around the clock is becoming the new normal as wearable technology gains traction and becomes increasingly widespread. According to IDTechEx, continuous health data tracking is now a realistic possibility thanks to innovations in devices like smartwatches, smart rings, and skin patches.

Wearables are transforming how people monitor key biometrics. Heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, blood oxygen, glucose, and motion are among the main measurements these devices can capture. Optical sensors, for example, detect heart rate and blood oxygen by measuring light absorption in blood, providing valuable cardiovascular data. Electrodes measure electrical activity from muscles and the brain through the skin, offering insights into both neurological and muscular health.

Continuity is a key advantage of wearables. Unlike traditional medical devices, wearables sit close to the body, allowing constant monitoring. This real-time data can be stored in smartphone apps, enabling users and healthcare providers to track trends over long periods for more accurate and contextualised readings. Remote patient monitoring is becoming increasingly common, promising 24/7 tracking rather than intermittent check-ups.

Smartwatches stand out for their communication capabilities. Connected to smartphones, they can deliver health updates, notifications, and reminders hands-free. For people managing conditions such as diabetes, skin patches equipped with tiny needles can measure blood sugar and alert users when insulin is needed. These tools offer a practical way to integrate health monitoring into daily life while reducing dependence on clinic visits.

Wearable technology is also expanding into new frontiers, including smart glasses and brain-computer interfaces.

Smart glasses can provide real-time translations, visual narration, and directions, helping users navigate cities and communicate more easily. Meanwhile, magnetoencephalography helmets are being developed to measure brain activity outside of traditional scanning labs, potentially bringing neural insights to wearable, mobile forms.

The rise of wearable health technology promises not only convenience but also a shift in how healthcare is delivered. By continuously tracking vital signs and linking data to smartphones and



cloud systems, wearables give users a deeper understanding of their bodies while supporting healthcare providers in making informed decisions.

As IDTechEx reports, the wearable sensors market is set to grow rapidly between 2025 and 2035, driven by advances in sensing technologies, digital health integration, and artificial intelligence. With devices becoming smarter, more accurate, and increasingly connected, wearable technology is reshaping health management and empowering people to take control of their wellbeing.

From monitoring heart rates to interpreting neural signals, wearables are no longer just gadgets—they are tools that could redefine the future of personalised healthcare.

## ROCK OUT TO STAY YOUNG Music protects aging brains

Long-term musical training may help older adults overcome age-related difficulties in understanding speech, according to a study published in PLOS Biology. Researchers found that older musicians perform better in noisy environments than their non-musician peers, thanks to enhanced cognitive reserve.

Normal ageing often reduces sensory and cognitive function, leading the brain to recruit additional neural activity to compensate. However, positive lifestyle factors—like musical training, higher education, and bilingualism—can build cognitive reserve, allowing the brain to maintain more youthful patterns of activity.

In the study, 25 older musicians, 25 older non-musicians, and 24 young non-musicians



underwent fMRI scans while identifying syllables masked by noise. Older non-musicians showed the typical age-related increase in connectivity across auditory brain networks,

a compensatory response to declining processing. By contrast, older musicians displayed connectivity patterns resembling those of young adults, particularly in the right auditory dorsal stream, which correlated with better speech-in-noise perception.

The findings support the "Hold-Back Upregulation" hypothesis: cognitive reserve built through musical training preserves the brain's functional networks, reducing the need for overexertion and improving behavioural outcomes.

These results suggest that engaging in music may be a practical way to maintain communication skills and cognitive health into later life.