

## **Safeguarding against Japanese Encephalitis**

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A new single-dose vaccine against Japanese Encephalitis (JE) is set to hit the markets in India and neighbouring countries. Bharat Biotech, one of India's leading biotechnology companies, has entered into a manufacturing and marketing agreement with Acambis Plc with regard to 'ChimeriVax-JE', an investigational vaccine against JE.

Under the agreement, Bharat Biotech will be responsible for end-stage processing of the vaccine at its facilities in Hyderabad besides marketing and distributing it in India and neighbouring countries once the vaccine is approved. Phase III clinical trials of the vaccine will commence next month and will be completed within two months.

JE, a virus transmitted to humans by mosquitoes, is considered to be the leading cause of childhood encephalitis and viral encephalitis in Asia. Worldwide, three billion people are estimated to be facing the risk of being affected by JE. Currently, an epidemic is affecting areas of northern India and Nepal, with more than 1,000 people having died in India since July, most of them children. Every year, there are an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 cases of JE, approximately 25 to 30 per cent of which are fatal; a high proportion of survivors are left with serious neurological impairment.

Meanwhile, scientists at the National Institute of Immunology in New Delhi have reportedly developed plant-based oral vaccines with the help of protein synthesised in plants to provide immunity against JE. Clinical experiments have been completed and the vaccines are expected to be available in the next six months or so.

Definitely positive news but considering that JE is endemic in developing nations where mortality rates are high mainly because patients cannot bear the expenses of medication, these vaccines have to be made affordable to the common man to be able to make any significant difference to victims.