



Onchocerciasis is a parasitic disease caused by *Onchocerca volvulus*, which is transmitted to humans by black flies (genus *Simulium*). It can cause severe skin and eye disease, including blindness. It is commonly known as “river blindness” because the black fly vectors breed in fast-flowing rivers. Worldwide, an estimated 18 million people are infected and 270,000 blinded by the disease. Onchocerciasis is endemic in Africa, where it is a leading cause of blindness, and in specific areas (foci) of five countries of the Americas—Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Venezuela—where it was introduced through the slave trade. Transmission has been eliminated in Colombia, formerly an endemic country, and has been interrupted or eliminated in 11 of 13 foci elsewhere in the Americas. Today, only about 20,495 people in Brazil and Venezuela remain in need of continual treatment. The antiparasitic drug ivermectin is donated to countries that require it by the global Mectizan® Donation Program. The minimum recommended coverage of biannual mass treatment with ivermectin has been maintained in the 13 foci of the Americas since 2002.

Key facts

- Blindness by onchocerciasis is considered as eliminated in the Americas since 1995.
- In 2013, Colombia became the first country in the world to achieve verification of the elimination of onchocerciasis transmission.
- As of March 2014, there was evidence of elimination of transmission in seven foci in Guatemala, Mexico, and Ecuador.
- There is also evidence of interruption of transmission in four additional foci in Venezuela, Mexico, and Guatemala.
- In late 2013, Ecuador submitted a request for verification of elimination of onchocerciasis to PAHO/WHO. The International Verification Team is expected to visit Ecuador by mid-2014.
- Guatemala and Mexico are expected to be in a position to request verification by 2015, followed by Brazil and Venezuela.
- The Yanomami area of the Amazon region, shared by Brazil and Venezuela, is regarded as the greatest challenge for completing regional interruption of onchocerciasis transmission.

PAHO/WHO response

- In 1994, WHO Member States endorsed the mass distribution of ivermectin for onchocerciasis elimination and called for the development and dissemination of epidemiological methods for onchocerciasis evaluation and/or mapping in endemic countries.
- In 2008, PAHO/WHO Member States set the goal of interrupting onchocerciasis transmission by 2012 ([CD48.R12](#)), and this goal was ratified in 2009 as one of a series of targets for eliminating neglected diseases ([CD49.R19](#)).
- PAHO/WHO is an active partner in the Onchocerciasis Elimination Program for the Americas (OEPA), a regional initiative sponsored by the Carter Center and supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), USAID, and other partners.



www.paho.org/WorldHealthDay2014

For more information, visit: www.paho.org/onchocerciasis

