Key facts

- Geohelminthiasis, or soil-transmitted helminthiasis, are commonly known as intestinal worm and generally affect the poorest communities. The causative agents are the nematodes: *Ascaris lumbricoides*, *Trichuris trichiura* and human hookworms (*Necator americanus* and *Anclyostoma duodenale*). Mode of transmission include ingestion of infective eggs from soil contaminated with human feces, agricultural products contaminated by egg-contaminated soil (*A. lumbricoides*, and *T. trichiura*), and through penetration of skin by larvae, primarily from walking barefoot (human hookworms). Infection primarily affects cognitive and physical development in children due to malabsorption of micronutrients, reduced ability to eat, obstruction of the intestinal and biliary tracts from ascariasis, rectal prolapse from trichuriasis, and anemia caused by human hookworms; all of which have a large impact on the social and economic development in communities with high prevalence of geohelminthiasis, due the effect on ability to work in adults and increased school-absenteeism in children.

- To combat geohelminthiasis, PAHO/WHO recommends mass administration of anti-parasitic medicines (albendazole or mebendazole) for pre-school and school-aged children living in areas of high risk for infection (once per year in areas of low risk – prevalence between 20 and 50%, and twice per year in areas of high risk – prevalence >50%), as well as, the promotion of access to safe water, basic sanitation and sanitary education through intersectoral coordinated work.

- Globally, 2 billion people are infected with soil-transmitted helminths, considered the most common infection in the world, with some 300 million living in a state of severe illness or continual impediment. Parasitic intestinal infections are estimated to affect more than one third of the global population, with the highest rates among school-age children.

- In the Americas, soil-transmitted helminths are present throughout the Region. It is estimated that one out of every three people is infected with geohelminths, and close to 46 million children between the ages of 1 and 14 are at risk for infection by these parasites [approximately 13 million pre-school age children (1 to 4 years) and 33.3 million school age children (5 to 14 years)] through lack of basic sanitation and access to clean water. Infection is most common in women and children.

- In 2012, 6.4 million pre-school and 19.2 million school-age children were administered anti-parasitic medicines in 13 countries (Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela), of which seven reported coverage rates of 75% or higher in school age children (Belize, El Salvador, Guyana, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Nicaragua), and five in pre-school age children (Belize, Guyana, Haiti, Mexico and Nicaragua).

PAHO/WHO’s response

- In 2001, the World Health Assembly approved Resolution WHA54.19, whose objectives are to reduce death and disability and improve the health and development of communities affected by soil-transmitted helminths and schistosomiasis; and to guarantee access to essential medicines against these diseases, with the goal of treating between 75 and 100% of all school-age children at risk for geohelminthiasis by the year 2010, in conjunction with plans to increase access to basic sanitation and potable water. At the global level, these goals have not been achieved but they have increased the number of children receiving anti-parasitic medicines.

- In 2009 the PAHO’s Directing Council approved Resolution CD49.R19 on the elimination of neglected infectious diseases and other poverty-related disease, urging Member States to adopt necessary measures to control geohelminthiasis (among other neglected diseases). The measures were to reduce the burden of disease as a public health problem by 2015, and reduce the prevalence among school-age children in high-risk populations from above 50% to below 20% by 2015. In 2013, the Organization of American States-OAS approved Resolution AG/RES.2810(XLIII-O/13) in support of PAHO’s Resolution CD49.R19.

- In 2013, the World Health Assembly approved Resolution WHA62.12 urging Member States to implement interventions against neglected tropical diseases (including STH), to reach the targets as set out in WHO’s roadmap for these diseases.

For more information, please visit: www.paho.org/sth