
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 19 JANUARY 2022

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Good morning and thank you for joining this week's press briefing.

COVID cases continue to accelerate, reaching new peaks in our region. Over the last week, the Americas reported nearly 7.2 million new COVID infections and more than 15,000 COVID-related deaths.

In North America, the US and Canada continue to experience a surge of COVID hospitalizations.

Panama, Costa Rica, and Honduras are reporting the highest numbers of new COVID cases in Central America, with cases more than doubling over the last week.

The Caribbean islands are witnessing the steepest increase in COVID infections since the start of the pandemic. Cases in Martinique have increased by more than 600% and in Saint Martin they have risen by more than 135%. Cases have at least doubled in more than 17 countries and territories, which is especially concerning as hospital capacity in many islands remains limited.

COVID infections are accelerating in Colombia, Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia. COVID hospitalizations are also growing in Paraguay, Uruguay, and Argentina.

Although Omicron infections appear to be milder, we continue to urge caution because the virus is spreading more actively than ever before.

That means it's critical to protect our health systems so individuals who need care can count on it.

And the best way for us to protect our health systems is to get vaccinated when it's our turn.

Vaccines shield us from the worst COVID symptoms and reduce our chances of needing hospitalized care.

More than 60% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID. We aim to vaccinate at least 70% of the population by mid-2022. PAHO's Revolving Fund will soon reach the milestone of delivering 100 million doses of vaccines to 33 countries, and as more vaccines become available, we encourage those who haven't been vaccinated please to do so.

As COVID surges throughout the region, countries are facing a familiar challenge: COVID testing.

The good news is that even before COVID arrived in our region two years ago, PAHO has been working to bolster our region's laboratory capacity to respond to emerging pathogens, so every country had the training, the supplies, and the ability to perform COVID diagnostic tests.

Today we have a network of more than 32 laboratories across the Americas, including National Influenza Centers and Public Health Laboratories in at least 29 countries. These labs analyze virus samples from our region to help countries track and learn how this virus is evolving. The network is also on the lookout for new or evolving viruses, so that our region is prepared as new threats arise.

This network has helped detect the arrival of Omicron in countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic – helping governments adapt their responses to this latest wave.

But even with this strong lab network, demand for testing is higher than ever – especially as many countries in our region are also experiencing an active flu season – so it's critical that countries use tests smartly.

We believe that the best way to scale up testing is to leverage rapid antigen tests, which offer a diagnosis in minutes, not days.

Rapid tests do not require specialized training or expensive equipment. And they can be deployed to primary health centers, where they can reach more people closer to home.

We urge countries to expand testing at the community level to relieve the pressure on hospitals, which are working overtime.

Because we are facing a testing shortage, PAHO recommends that countries prioritize rapid antigen tests for individuals who are experiencing COVID symptoms and are at risk of spreading the virus.

Individuals who are asymptomatic and have been, or think they have been, exposed to COVID should be advised to quarantine when possible, and follow effective public health measures like social distancing, mask wearing and avoiding large gatherings to prevent getting others sick.

Be assured that PAHO is doing everything it can to support countries. Since the COVID-19 emergency began, we have acquired more than 42 million PCR and rapid antigen tests for 36 countries through the PAHO Strategic Fund.

We have deployed 10 million PCR diagnostic tests and 2.8 million rapid diagnostic tests from our stockpile in Panama to countries in need. In the last few weeks, we have sent tests to quickly increase capacity in Bolivia, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and St. Kitts and Nevis.

PAHO has also established long term agreements with two of the WHO-approved manufacturers of COVID diagnostic tests so that we can secure tests for our region at a fraction of the price.

Countries can and should take advantage of these agreements by purchasing diagnostic tests through our Strategic Fund.

Since January of 2021, our Strategic Fund has purchased more than 22 million COVID tests, including PCR and Rapid Diagnostic tests, on behalf of our countries, and we expect our orders will ramp up this year.

As Omicron continues to spread rapidly throughout the region, our testing capacity will be limited for some time.

That's why it's important to remember that testing alone will not overcome this virus.

Slowing the spread of COVID will require every tool in our arsenal - vaccines, social distancing, mask wearing, avoiding large gatherings, and testing.

We need to rely on all of these measures to continue to protect ourselves and each other against this virus.