
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 16 MARCH 2022

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

Weekly COVID-19 cases in the Americas reached 901,000 last week, a 19% overall decrease compared to the previous week. While most parts of the region showed decreases, in the Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean Islands, cases increased by 56.6%.

Weekly COVID-19 deaths also fell, with 15,523 new deaths reported, an 18.4% decline. All parts of the region reported declines in deaths, ranging from a 6.9% drop in the Caribbean to a 27.9% decrease in Central America.

COVID-19 infections and deaths are declining in most of our region, but there are still too many cases and deaths being reported every day – a clear indication that transmission is not yet under control. Since the virus arrived in the Americas two years ago, 149 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported and 2.6 million people have died.

Cases are rising again in other parts of the world, serving as a cautionary tale for our Region. Cases increased by 28.9% in the Western Pacific Region, by 12.3% in the African region, and by almost 2 percent in the European region.

This virus puts us all at risk, especially the unvaccinated. That's why we must continue our efforts to close the equity gap, and protect the most vulnerable with COVID-19 vaccines.

Over the course of the pandemic, vaccines have been prioritized by Presidents, Ministers of Finance, and other decision-makers, and they've been embraced by the public.

Now, many countries and territories are on track to reach the 70% coverage target by June of 2022.

Eight countries and territories have vaccinated more than 80% of their population. Others are not far behind and have been making steady progress.

But we still have a lot of work ahead to improve our resilience to COVID-19.

21 countries and territories have yet to vaccinate half of their population.

And even in places with high overall coverage, some of the most vulnerable, such as the immunocompromised and the elderly, have not yet been protected, leaving them and our health systems at risk.

As we continue to expand COVID vaccine coverage, we must also improve the falling coverage of other vaccines. Our health systems have been concentrating on the pandemic response, but they also need to maintain their focus on routine immunization, which prevents other serious diseases and saves lives.

Vaccine coverage for polio, measles and rubella, diphtheria, and other childhood diseases had been falling even before COVID struck. The heavy impact of the pandemic only made this worse.

In two years, we've rolled back nearly three decades of progress on polio and measles, putting us back to the same vaccination levels we had in 1994.

In parts of Brazil, we have ongoing outbreaks of measles, a disease our Region had once eliminated, despite the great efforts that the country is making to interrupt the circulation of measles.

And once pervasive diseases such as diphtheria and yellow fever threaten to resurge, unless we act quickly.

While we have no active polio cases in the Region, recent cases in places like Israel and Malawi serve as a dire warning for the threat we could face if we don't bring coverage levels back up soon.

HPV vaccination, which prevents cervical cancer in our young women and girls, has also stalled across the Region due to school disruptions.

COVID-19 showed us, once again, that vaccines are the most important tool to control infectious disease and save lives.

We need strong political and technical leadership at national and local levels to raise vaccination coverage against each disease, building on the rapid rollout of COVID vaccines.

Sustained investment and commitment at the highest levels helped us get COVID vaccines into millions of arms. They are also key to protect our children, family and friends from vaccine preventable diseases.

Countries are already beginning their work to make up for lost progress.

Many countries restarted campaigns against measles, rubella, and polio in 2021, and at least eight countries are already planning to do follow-up measles campaigns this year, aiming to protect more than 67 million children against these viruses.

As we have done for the past 20 years, we will work with countries across the Region to run coordinated national campaigns during Vaccination Week in the Americas to catch up all persons – children, adolescents, and adults – on their missed vaccines. This is a reminder for countries to continue strengthening their national immunization efforts.

The PAHO Revolving Fund will continue to support countries with purchases of routine vaccines, just as it has helped secure deliveries of COVID vaccines.

We can leverage COVID vaccination efforts to deliver other essential vaccines.

PAHO's investments in expanding access to COVID-19 vaccines, made with the financial support of the United States and Canada, are supporting countries to strengthen their cold chain and logistics efforts.

Countries like Mexico are repurposing their COVID vaccine infrastructure to expand routine immunization against measles and rubella.

In the Southern Hemisphere, influenza season is starting. We encourage countries to offer flu and COVID vaccination at the same time, so they can protect people against two diseases at once.

And we must remain committed to getting COVID vaccines to all those who need it.

As countries work towards the 70% coverage goal for COVID vaccines, they must ensure they are reaching the right groups – especially the most vulnerable adults.

Countries should make decisions about COVID-19 vaccination policies based on scientific evidence.

This means keeping their focus on the elderly, health workers and other high-risk groups, even as vaccination rates rise in the overall population.

They must work with local leaders and organizations to tailor their communication campaigns towards communities' concerns and close the gaps that remain.

Countries like Ecuador, Colombia, Paraguay, Brazil, and others have successfully expanded vaccination coverage in their indigenous populations, thanks to deep partnerships with trusted local leaders.

Rebuilding the strong backbone of immunization programs that can sustain high coverage is essential to securing our children’s future and allowing our Region to flourish. Countries can take advantage of the momentum from the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, which saw 675 million people trusting vaccines and completing their schedule to protect against disease and death.

We cannot waste time. We have the experience, tools, and know-how to catch up on missed vaccinations, prevent diseases, and protect our families today and in the future. We invite the countries' leaders to build a political commitment to solid, equitable immunization, focused on routine programs that include the Covid19 vaccine.

It is up to all of us – parents, health workers, communities, donors, and governments – to sustain our commitment to the life-saving power of vaccines.