
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—1 JUNE 2022

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

COVID-19 cases and deaths have continued to rise across our Region. Last week, there were 1,087,390 cases and 4,155 deaths reported in the Americas. This represents a 10.4% increase in the number of cases, and a 14% increase in deaths.

At the subregional level, all subregions except the Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean Islands have seen increases both in cases and deaths. The highest increase in cases was in South America, with a 43.1% increase, and the highest increase in deaths was in Central America with a 21.3% rise.

Cases in the region have been increasing for the past 6 weeks. Now, as the summer holiday season approaches in the northern hemisphere and the winter season starts in the southern hemisphere, we must continue to be vigilant.

We have the tools to prevent the worst consequences of this virus. As cases rise and hospitals get busy, now is the time to use these tools. Our toolkit includes masks and public health measures to slow down the spread of the virus and vaccines to avoid severe diseases and deaths.

Our health systems are still recovering from the disruptions brought by the pandemic, but they are now facing another surge of COVID-19 cases, coupled with a growing risk of current public health events, including Monkeypox, viral hepatitis, and other respiratory infections.

Since the introduction of SARS-CoV-2, influenza cases have been exceptionally low in the Region. But this situation started to change in 2022: the flu virus is circulating again and not just during traditional flu season.

Mexico and Peru have seen higher numbers of influenza cases than expected, and Argentina, Chile and Uruguay have reported more hospitalizations than usual due to influenza.

Chile, Paraguay, Brazil, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic are also experiencing surges of the RSV virus in young children, in some cases leading to hospitalization.

Just as we have responded to COVID, we must use all the resources that we have at hand. Starting with vaccines.

The current flu vaccine used in the Southern Hemisphere reflects the strains circulating now and can provide better protection to all at risk.

Brazil and Ecuador kicked off their influenza vaccination campaigns during the Vaccination Week in the Americas.

At least 15 other countries are launching campaigns to reach the elderly, pregnant people, children, and other vulnerable groups.

These campaigns are important every year, but even more important this year as we are facing multiple risks at the same time.

Countries should expand surveillance to monitor other respiratory viruses, not just COVID.

Most countries have integrated COVID-19 surveillance with efforts to track the influenza virus. We should build on that capacity to quickly identify the different respiratory viruses that are circulating in the Americas.

It is important to note that the same public health measures that protect people from COVID-19 also protect people from the flu.

But this recent surge represents a risk for our health systems. And we should track hospital capacity closely.

Many places are facing the double threat of a potential influenza surge alongside a rise in COVID-19 cases, which will put healthcare workers, the elderly and pregnant women at additional risk.

Some countries are facing a triple threat, with the addition of an RSV wave in children.

We have the expertise to treat people affected by these viruses.

But countries must adjust their capacity and direct enough resources and staff to help our health systems put this knowledge to use and save more lives.

This brings me to another point of pressure for health services in the Americas, especially in Central America and the Caribbean: hurricane season is once again upon us.

Climate change has led to an undeniable rise in the frequency and impact of extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, unusually heavy rains, and floods in many parts of our Region.

And while we must do all in our power to slow climate change, we also have to prepare to face the immediate consequences of extreme weather events.

The US' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Central America Integration System expect to see more storms than average this year, especially in the Atlantic, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.

This is concerning as it only takes one massive storm to destroy people's livelihoods, cripple our health systems and lead to countless lives lost.

We must prepare early so we are not caught off guard.

Many countries already have national plans for extreme weather events.

It is time now to revisit those strategies, to make sure they are up to date and to put plans into action.

Countries should have a detailed understanding of their risk areas, and the likely populations and health facilities which could be affected. PAHO has met with countries to assess risks, to review plans, and to help address vulnerabilities ahead of time.

Long term investments were also made with the support of PAHO's SMART hospitals program, supporting renovations of health centers in areas that are vulnerable to natural disasters so that they could better withstand crisis events.

This approach has been applied across the Region and has helped, for instance, the Chateaubelair hospital in St. Vincent and the Grenadines withstand a volcanic eruption, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a hurricane.

Whether it is COVID-19, hurricanes, or seasonal respiratory viruses, we must rely on the same health systems to respond and recover.

At a time of crisis, our wellbeing and that of our societies depend on the resilience of our health systems. That is an important lesson from COVID-19 that we cannot ignore. Heads of States at the ninth Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles June 8 to 10th will commit towards building a sustainable resilient and equitable future, which includes resilience in health and the economies.

We must plan and invest now to deal with the risks of today and better prepare for the challenges of tomorrow.

An investment in health is essential to secure everything that we hope for the future of our Region: resilience and security, economic prosperity, and the wellbeing of our people.