

PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION (PAHO)
Addressing the Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the Region of the Americas
Highlights of PAHO Technical Cooperation – 17 May 2022
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Current COVID-19 trends

COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are rising again in far too many places, requiring countries to strengthen measures to combat the virus, including surveillance and preparedness. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) continues to monitor the evolution of the virus and is helping countries in the Region of the Americas to maintain adequate testing capacity. Updates for the week ending April 28, 2022 are as follows:

- The Region of the Americas reported more than 616,000 new cases, a 12.7% increase over the previous week, and more than 4,200 deaths, a slight drop of less than 1%.
- The Caribbean reported a 15.4% increase in new infections, with cases rising in 24 of the 34 countries and territories.
- Cases have continued to rise in Central America for the same period by 53.4%, with three out of seven countries reporting increases, even as deaths continued to decline.
- In South America there was an overall decrease of 8% in new infections, although seven of the ten countries reported increases in cases.
- Eleven countries and territories across the Region reported an increase in hospitalizations and increases in admissions to intensive care units.

Strengthening regional capacity to track SARS-CoV-2

The PAHO-coordinated [COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network \(COVIGEN\)](#) is working to build and enhance regional laboratory capacity to sequence SARS-CoV-2. The resulting increase in the number of sequences uploaded into global databases enables timely detection of new variants of concern (VOC) or changes in transmissibility and/or virulence of circulating SARS-CoV-2 viruses.

COVIGEN includes countries with in-country sequencing and those that send their samples to any of the eight regional sequencing laboratories.¹ PAHO encourages laboratories to sequence COVID-19 positive samples and share genetic information through the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data ([GISAID](#)) platform.

In addition to coordinating COVIGEN, PAHO provides countries and laboratories with reagents, organizes training and updating sessions, and covers the costs for shipment of the variant samples to the reference laboratories. Molecular screening reagents were delivered to at least 23 countries for early detection of VOCs to complement genomic surveillance.

With COVIGEN efforts, PAHO Member States' accomplishments as of 15 March 2022 included:

- More than 296,729 full genome sequences of SARS-CoV-2 from Latin America and the Caribbean were uploaded to the GISAID platform.
- More than 15 shipments with specimens from eight countries with no or only limited sequencing laboratory capacity were completed, resulting in over 600 sequences from areas that otherwise would not have had this information.
- Twenty-four countries/territories regularly reported COVID-19 surveillance data.

Expanding access to COVID-19 rapid diagnostic tests

PAHO is working to expand the number of countries and populations in Latin America and the Caribbean with access to antigen testing rapid diagnostic test (Ag-RDT) through procurement that supports country use of the tests in line with regional guidelines. Also, PAHO is ensuring proper use of the tests by assessing countries' diagnostic strategies and capacities, and is collecting test information for integration into surveillance systems. Prioritized countries for expanded use of tests currently include Argentina, Brazil, Barbados, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Jamaica, and Mexico.

PAHO's strategic stock in Panama allows for quick mobilization of essential supplies, bridging the gaps between needs in the field and vendors' lead times. Cross-functional coordination with other units, including PAHO's procurement department and the Incident Management Support Team (IMST), helps to ensure timely shipment of supplies and effective demand planning, while recognizing ongoing global supply challenges.

Strengthening countries' health services to respond to COVID-19

The combined impact of PAHO's interventions is expected to help reduce morbidity and mortality from COVID-19. At the same time, it is building upon PAHO's prior work to expand and reorganize health networks to improve equitable access to quality health services for COVID-19 patients.

¹ Fiocruz (Fundación Oswaldo Cruz) in Brazil; Instituto de Salud Pública in Chile; InDRE in Mexico; the Gorgas Institute in Panama; the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States; the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago; the Inciensa in Costa Rica; and the Instituto Nacional de Salud in Colombia.

During the first quarter of 2022, PAHO has:

- Initiated procurement of essential medical supplies, including PPE, oxygen (O₂) concentrators, pulse oximeters, syringes, and nasal cannulas. To assure the quality and security of procured medical supplies, PAHO reviews technical specifications and ensures correct shipping documentation.
- Published a guide to good practices in effective use of oxygen (in Spanish, French, English, and Portuguese) and produced Spanish-language videos on sustainable use of oxygen. PAHO's Oxygen Team is also working with countries and territories that requested direct support, including Guyana, Haiti, Montserrat, Nicaragua, and Peru.
- Supported development of national [Emergency Medical Teams \(EMTs\)](#) through virtual and in-person courses and virtual technical meetings in Haiti, Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic, with Bolivia implementing training in April 2022.
- Bolstered countries' health systems by monitoring Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) programs vital to protecting health workers and reducing COVID-19 transmission at community and health facility levels. PAHO provided training on IPC measures as well as guidelines, tools, and training for proper use of PPE and implementation of respiratory safety programs.
- Assisted countries in strengthening clinical and integrated management of critical resources within health services networks aimed at strengthening emergency services within health systems for timely diagnosis and initiation of COVID-19 case management; and increasing access to quality services by improving tele-support from more experienced units.
- Continued to synthesize reliable evidence in clinical management, including therapeutics, to counteract the spread of pandemic-related misinformation, including accelerating equitable access to recommended COVID-19 therapeutics, and supporting the implementation of clinical data platforms in countries to standardize collection of data on clinical features of COVID-19 among hospitalized patients.

Vaccinations remain critical to mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other diseases. For example, during *Vaccination Week in the Americas (VWA)*, held April 23-30, 2022, PAHO supported 44 countries and territories to deliver more than 12 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine. In addition, countries offered a wide array of vaccines against other infectious diseases such as measles, rubella, influenza, polio, yellow fever, pneumococcus, and HPV. Each country adapted the event to its own epidemiological situation to close existing immunization gaps and reduce the possibility of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Despite significant progress, many public health challenges due to COVID-19 remain. PAHO and its Member States must reach those who remain unvaccinated with the full COVID-19 vaccine primary series, and ensure access to boosters, especially to the most vulnerable.