

Weekly Press Briefing on COVID-19: Director's Opening Remarks, April 21, 2020

Good morning everyone. Thank you for joining.

As of April 20, there have been 893,119 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 42,686 people have lost their lives in our region. The pandemic continues to impact our region, and it's vital for all countries to actively embrace preventive measures, while preparing for more cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

We hope that the measures which have been implemented in many member states thus far are sufficient in flattening the curve significantly.

Each death from COVID-19 represents a life cut short, a family in mourning and wasted potential for the people of the Americas. I stand in solidarity with the families shaken by loss in this time of crisis. We are with you. And we are working night and day to contain this pandemic in honor of your loved ones.

We are fighting an invisible enemy, not just because the virus can't be seen with the naked eye, but because we don't have a full picture of how COVID-19 is affecting our societies.

This must change – we need a clearer view of where the virus is circulating and how many people have been infected in order to guide our actions. It is important to accelerate and expand testing to track the spread of COVID-19 in the Americas.

Expanded and decentralized testing will help us better monitor the trends of the pandemic within each country. This helps governments introduce, reinforce or adapt public health measures, such as social distancing.

Expanded testing will also allow local health authorities to implement and strengthen contact tracing to quickly isolate suspected cases and break the chain of transmission in communities.

It's no surprise that countries like the Republic of Korea or Germany, which had notable success limiting the impact of COVID-19, implemented widespread testing and contact tracing early in their response.

I urge countries in our region to follow their example and expand their existing testing capacities. When combined with other basic public health measures, testing can be a powerful tool to manage the pandemic and save lives.

Before the pandemic was declared, many countries in our region were prepared to test and detect cases of COVID-19. By the end of February, PAHO has distributed reagents required for PCR testing and provided training for their appropriate use to more than 30 Member States. PCR testing remains the gold standard for diagnosing cases and isolating them.

These PCR tests are affordable and highly accurate when performed by well-trained personnel in public health laboratories. PAHO continues to provide critical material to maintain this core detection capacity within the Region's Public Health Laboratory Network.

But as the number of cases have increased, countries have found it increasingly difficult to keep up. And we fully recognize that ramping up testing capacity for COVID-19 is a challenge for many countries in our region, which limits effective public health measures and the timely access to health care.

This is partly due to the uneven capacity of health systems to quickly process a large volume of tests.

At a time of crisis, many of our health systems require significant support to handle the high number of suspect cases in their areas.

Another challenge is that manufacturers are not providing enough tests as quickly as we need them. Even sophisticated companies in our region have been forced to exponentially scale up their supply chains, output capacity and distribution in just a couple of months.

That level of scale-up is unprecedented, however, we are seeing encouraging signs that the market is starting to catch up. But equally important is that we must ensure that these emerging tests are reliable and efficacious.

In these challenging circumstances, what do we at PAHO recommend to countries?

First, expand lab capacity. Countries are encouraged scale up testing for COVID-19 by using all of the public and private laboratory capacity available at the national level.

Second, prioritize according to availability. When there are limitations, we need to prioritize patients with symptoms, contact trace and follow up with those that may be infected.

Third, ensure access to all. Testing should be free of charge to patients. High prices create a barrier between a patient and the treatment that he or she desperately needs. We need to expand access so that everyone who needs a test gets one.



PAHO will continue to work with member states to make these recommendations a reality, building on our 118 years of partnership in the region.

Thus far, PAHO has provided more than 500,000 PCR tests to 34 countries and territories, and we have worked with other countries to track and support their capacity.

This week we are dispatching 1.5 million more PCR tests throughout the region, followed by another 3 million next week to strengthen laboratory surveillance networks in our member states.

To address the market shortage, we are working with leading manufacturers to make these tests available through the PAHO Strategic Fund. Twelve countries are now using this mechanism to purchase quality commercial PCR-based tests.

As we negotiate other options, we are considering tests that run on both open and on so-called closed platforms, to maximize each country's ability to test.

But not all tests are equal, and we want to help ensure countries procure reliable products. PAHO is providing guidance that will support National Regulatory Authorities and Ministries of Health in making sound decisions.

We would like to call on manufacturers to work closely with us so that we can ensure equitable access to new quality tests, as they reach the market and all our countries can benefit from innovations.

The landscape is changing fast and PAHO will continue to help quickly evaluate new tests as they become available. Our platforms and expert teams are available to all member-states as a resource to guide and support you.