
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS-16 JUNE 2021

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A very good morning to you and thank you for joining today's press briefing.

Last week there were over 1.1 million new COVID-19 cases and 31,000 new deaths reported in the Americas. And for the last few weeks, four of the five countries with the highest weekly death counts in the world continue to be here in our own region.

Mexico has reported a slight uptick in cases driven mostly by both the Baja California region and the Yucatan region over the past 2 weeks, while COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are slowing in the U.S. and Canada.

Cuba and the Dominican Republic continue to drive most new cases in the Caribbean, while Trinidad and Tobago is still reporting high death rates.

In Central America, infections over the past 2 weeks are on the rise in parts of Belize, while case incidence in Guatemala and Panama has risen over the past week. Costa Rica and Honduras are starting to see a decline in cases.

Further south, recent surges in COVID infections are filling hospitals in Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay mostly with younger patients between 25 and 40 years of age. In the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo, 80% of ICU beds are occupied by COVID patients. And Colombia's COVID situation is now at its highest point nationally, with very high occupancy of ICU beds in large metropolitan cities.

Against this backdrop, we urge countries to tighten public health measures in places with high transmission. This is the most effective way to bring cases down until we have enough vaccines for everyone.

Over the weekend, leaders from the Group of Seven pledged one billion COVID vaccine doses for countries in need around the world.

This promise brings fresh confidence that we will overcome the supply barriers that have prevented many nations and territories in our region from getting the doses that they need to protect their populations.

Today, less than one in ten people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID, yet we're a region of more than 600 million people where cases are mounting, hospitals are full, and variants are rapidly circulating.

So, while vaccines are needed everywhere, we hope that G7 nations will prioritize doses for countries at greatest risk – especially those in Latin America that have not yet had access to enough vaccines to even protect even the most vulnerable.

These doses cannot come soon enough, so we urge G7 countries not to delay their donations. We need the vaccines now.

Across the Americas, while COVID vaccines have been slow to arrive, uptake hasn't.

Just this past weekend, over 140,000 people were vaccinated in the Brazilian city of Manaus. And throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, people are eager for a chance to get vaccinated.

It's easy to see why: because vaccines work.

More than two billion COVID doses have been administered around the world.

In places where COVID vaccination coverage has been high – like some US states, the UK and Israel –there has been a dramatic reduction in COVID-related hospitalizations and deaths.

When outbreaks occur – as Chile is experiencing now – COVID vaccines are protecting those who are vaccinated, including health workers, from the worst of the virus.

This is exactly what COVID vaccines were designed to do: protect our communities and to help us save lives.

With the prospect of additional doses, we want to remind countries about the importance of communication campaigns to maintain trust in vaccines.

Having clear and transparent information about when doses are or aren't available, and consistent guidance on who is eligible for vaccinations is key to increasing confidence in our vaccination programs.

It is when there are breakdowns in information and communication or when details are slow to arrive that misinformation can take root.

The WHO and PAHO have issued updated guidelines for countries making and adjusting their COVID vaccination campaigns as additional doses are made available.

When these new doses arrive, we also want to remind countries that prioritizing vaccines for those most vulnerable, like the elderly, our frontline workers and those living with pre-existing conditions, that this is key to protecting hospitals and saving more lives.

Health workers should receive special attention as they're not just at greater risk of contracting the virus, but they're also some of the most trusted voices for vaccines.

People naturally turn to health workers – including doctors, nurses, and community health workers – for medical advice, so we must ensure that our health workers have the information that they need to answer their communities' and their own families' questions.

Finally, I want to remind citizens that the vaccines authorized by WHO and delivered through COVAX have been thoroughly assessed by experts. So, when it's your turn to get vaccinated, embrace what's available to you and don't delay your vaccination.

Getting vaccinated as soon as you're eligible is the best way to protect yourself and your community. This also means that if your vaccine requires two doses, you should get your second dose when it's scheduled to ensure that you have the best possible protection.

I want to be clear that the primary issue in the Americas is vaccine access, and not vaccine acceptance.

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, we have a long legacy in immunization and trust in the life-saving power of vaccines.

Once new doses are available, countries are ready to distribute them as quickly as they arrive and PAHO will work tirelessly to get vaccines to every corner in our region, until this pandemic is behind us.

We're counting on our leaders and the support of the global community to ensure that the Americas have the doses that they need – as soon as possible – to save lives.