
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—21 JULY 2021

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

Over the last week, our region reported over 967,000 new cases and 22,000 deaths, a slight decrease from the previous week.

More and more, disease trends are showing a region divided by vaccine access. In countries with adequate vaccine supply, infections are decreasing; in places where vaccine coverage is still low, in those countries, infections remain high.

In Costa Rica, where nearly one in three people are already vaccinated, COVID cases are steadily dropping. South American countries with higher rates of vaccinations – like Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina – are reporting steep declines in cases. COVID infections are decreasing across Canada and most of the U.S. The U.S. states that are reporting increases are the ones with lower vaccination rates, demonstrating the importance of vaccines to control this virus.

Unfortunately, across Latin America and the Caribbean, only 15 percent of people have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and several countries – like Honduras and Haiti – have yet to reach even one percent. And while vaccine donations are on their way to these countries, vaccine coverage remains dangerously low in many more countries across our region.

COVID cases are accelerating in most Central American countries, with Guatemala reporting high infections and hospitalizations. Neighboring Honduras is seeing an increase in COVID cases in states along its border.

In the Caribbean, COVID cases and deaths are spiking in Cuba, where many provinces are reporting dramatic increases in new infections. The situation is especially acute in the province of Matanzas.

Cuba is not the only one: many smaller islands are also reporting an increase in infections. Over the last week, Martinique has seen a tripling of cases – mainly among young people in their 20s – driven by large gatherings.

Worrisome hotspots also persist in Amazonian states in Colombia and Peru.

These trends illustrate how COVID-19 remains entrenched within our region, particularly in countries with low vaccination coverage. And the spread of variants only makes matters worse.

Viruses have one goal: to multiply.

That's why they often adapt to become less dangerous but more contagious over time. And that's what we're seeing with the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19.

Many of today's "variants of concern" spread more easily, so they're driving new infections in our region and around the world.

So far, 47 countries and territories in our region have detected at least one "variant of concern" and 11 have detected all four of today's most concerning variants: alpha, beta, gamma, and delta.

New variants will emerge as long as the SARS-CoV-2 virus continues to spread.

We face a pandemic of the unvaccinated, and the only way to stop it is to expand vaccination.

Vaccines are critical, even if no vaccine is 100% effective.

Just as important are the public health measures – like physical distancing, mask wearing, avoiding crowds – and also infection control measures like testing, contact tracing, quarantining and isolation.

Together, these measures are the fundamentals of our response and they remain effective against variants of concern.

Thanks to the efforts of countries across the Americas, our region has built a robust and innovative surveillance network that enables us to keep a close eye on the emergence and spread of COVID-19 variants.

The COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network was launched in the early days of the pandemic to tackle the eventual arrival of variants.

Together, and using science as a common language, countries committed to bolster their laboratory capacity, to hire staff, and to make surveillance a priority, building on the legacy of our region's longstanding dengue and influenza surveillance and laboratory networks.

What started as a handful of labs in 2020 has expanded into a robust network of 24 laboratories – and growing – this network runs samples from all over the Americas and actively provides information.

PAHO has been supporting the network by standardizing laboratory protocols, conducting trainings, and donating supplies for countries that have the technology to test and run samples. In places that haven't yet built up their lab capacity, PAHO has been working to collect samples and to ship these off to network labs.

This network has been instrumental in monitoring the virus's spread within border regions and among travelers, who are often the first to introduce variants into a country.

By working together, countries can detect new variants faster and more cost-effectively than by working alone. Along with epidemiological data, speed is essential so we can detect changes in the clinical presentation of the disease or its transmission patterns, and quickly adjust measures such as vaccination, therapeutics, and diagnosis. Countries can also activate contact tracing and other public health measures to limit the variants' circulation.

The information gathered by the network is also proving useful for scientists and epidemiologists around the world as they learn how the virus is changing to ensure that our responses remain effective.

While the network is focused on COVID-19 surveillance, this platform can just as easily be adapted to identify other viruses and emerging pathogens, so long as our region continues to invest in the training, materials and human resources that it will take for a network like this to function well.

The COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network is an example of the power of Pan-Americanism and the importance of working together to control this virus.

We must bring the same spirit of collaboration and solidarity to other dimensions of our COVID-19 response, especially vaccines.

Our countries stand ready to administer doses as soon as they arrive. PAHO continues to support Member States in their responses, and we remain committed to helping them vaccinate their eligible populations promptly and safely, regardless of who they are and where they live.

We urge donors and international agencies around the world to please help our region secure the vaccines. The vaccines that it needs to save lives and to bring this virus under control as soon as possible.

But until then, we must continue to protect ourselves and others by using the proven public health measures that can keep us safe from the virus and from all its variants.