
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS — 15 SEPTEMBER 2021

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Over the last week, some 1.4 million cases and 23,300 COVID-related deaths were reported in our region.

As many parts of the world are reporting a steady or decreasing number of cases, over the last week, the Americas reported a nearly 20% increase in new cases.

In North America, infections have risen by a third due to surges in the US and Canada. In the Canadian province of Alberta, COVID cases have doubled over the last week and hospitals are experiencing a critical staffing shortage. The US is reporting more than 100,000 new daily infections for the first time since January and hospital capacity in many southern US states remains worryingly low.

Infections are also surging in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Belize as many hospitals are completely saturated with COVID patients.

Meanwhile, infections have slowed in the Caribbean, although there are a few notable exceptions: Grenada, Barbados and Bermuda are reporting sharp jumps in cases, and Jamaica saw its highest weekly case count since the beginning of the pandemic.

Most South American countries are seeing continuing declines in COVID infections and deaths.

We are encouraged that more than 30% of the people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. But because these doses have not been equally distributed, there is still much to do to reach everyone who needs a vaccine.

As we talk about inequality in our region, we should also talk about a group whose needs haven't received the attention they deserve. Today, I want to provide an update on children and adolescents.

We've learned a lot about this virus over the last year and a half, including about how children and teens can catch and spread COVID.

When children get infected, they tend to have mild symptoms or none at all. But COVID-19 can cause severe illness in children and adolescents.

As with adults, if children have underlying conditions like diabetes, or if they're overweight or obese, they're more likely to get infected and more likely to develop serious symptoms that require hospitalization.

Younger children are less likely to pass the virus onto others, but risk goes up with age, and by the time they're older teens, young people are just as likely as adults to transmit the virus.

Last year, there were over 1.5 million COVID-19 cases among children and adolescents reported in this region. Nine months into this year, infections among children and adolescents have reached over 1.9 million.

As more adults receive their COVID-19 vaccines, children – who are not yet eligible for vaccinations in most countries – are representing a larger percentage of COVID hospitalizations and even deaths.

So, let's be clear: children and young people also face a significant risk of disease from COVID-19.

The pandemic is also affecting children's health in other ways.

Kids across our region are missing out on annual check-ups and routine vaccinations because of widespread disruptions to health *services*.

Half of young people have experienced increased stress or anxiety during the pandemic, yet mental health services and support, remain out of the reach for many.

Sexual and reproductive health services also remain disrupted across more than half of countries in the region, helping to fuel one of the largest jumps in teenage pregnancy that we've seen in more than a decade

Beyond the direct impact on their health – the virus' indirectly has consequences, and are hindering their growth and development and jeopardizing their chances at a bright future.

Lockdowns and economic disruptions have increased the risk of domestic violence and for many kids, homes may not be a safe place.

Our kids have missed more school days than children in any other region.

And despite efforts to leverage virtual classrooms, these can never substitute in-person schooling because schools are not only places where children *get* an education, they're also places where children socialize and can receive mental health support or a nutritious meal.

Each day that children go without in-person schooling, the higher the likelihood that they drop out and never return to school. For some of the most vulnerable children – particularly for our girls – this can have lasting consequences.

Experts agree that the pandemic has triggered the worst educational crisis that we have ever seen in *this* region.

The broad impact of the pandemic on children and adolescents cannot be ignored.

That's why we must protect children by giving them and their caregivers the support that they need to maintain the public health measures that have been proven effective against this virus.

While COVID vaccines are not yet approved for children in most countries, practicing physical distancing, washing hands often, wearing masks in public and avoiding crowded places can help keep children safe from the virus. Children and teens should get tested if they develop symptoms or if they suspect they're sick to avoid the infection of others.

Adults also play a role in keeping kids safe by themselves practicing these public health measures and getting vaccinated when it's their turn.

Countries should also do everything they can to safely reopen schools.

There is no zero-risk scenario, so national and local authorities should decide when it's time to open or close schools depending on the local epidemiological situation and the capacity to respond.

PAHO has developed detailed guidelines on the measures that are needed for school reopening – such as proper ventilation and sanitary conditions – and has published recommended measures to protect young people from COVID-19 infection.

As vaccines become available, teachers and school staff should be prioritized for vaccines because adults are more likely to bring the virus into the classrooms.

Now is the time for ministries of health, education, and social protection to work together and to design integrated policies that put children and families first.

Countries like Chile, Uruguay and Colombia have successful programs that incorporate education, health, and social services to meet the full needs of parents and children and to limit the consequences of the pandemic for their future.

And finally, we urge countries to bring parents, children, and adolescents to the table.

At the beginning of this pandemic, the virus was having a disproportionate impact on our elderly, and as a result, too many children and young people still don't think they're at risk, And we must change that.

It's important that children and teens understand their risk of getting sick and the role that they play in preventing COVID-19 transmission.

Countries need to develop communications campaigns that are specifically directed for children and adolescents that bring their needs and the resources available to them in focus, listening to

their concerns and their parents needs, and using language that they understand in platforms that they like – like TV and social media – platforms that resonate with them.

Today, children and teens across our region are at risk of becoming the generation that missed out on the health, education, and social opportunities that they needed to reach their fullest potential.

But it's not too late to address this. Countries must act urgently now to restore health, education, and social services to minimize the impact of this pandemic, so no child or teen is left behind – because their future is ours too.