
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—20 APRIL 2022

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Good morning. Thank you for joining us for this press briefing today.

Last week, there were more than 490,527 COVID cases reported in the Americas – a nearly 2.3% decrease as compared to the prior week. A total of 4,797 deaths were also recorded, representing a 15.2% decrease compared with the previous week.

In North America, cases increased by 11.2%, and in Canada hospitalizations also rose by more than 20%, as the proportion of Omicron BA.2 cases grew in the country.

As borders have re-opened and tourism has ramped up, cases have also surged in some Caribbean countries and territories, with Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Barbados, and Saint Martin recording the largest relative increases.

Nonetheless, on a broad scale, cases and deaths are declining in the Americas.

The decoupling of death rates and new infections is proof that vaccines are working well to protect people from hospitalization and death due to COVID-19.

Over two-thirds of people in Latin America and the Caribbean received two doses, and many countries in our Region have some of the highest coverage rates in the world.

With Vaccination Week in the Americas fast approaching, we can take a moment to celebrate this great achievement.

Thanks to the tireless commitment of healthcare workers, scientists, policymakers, and citizens across our Region, 14 countries have already reached the WHO goal of fully vaccinating 70% of their populations ahead of the June 30th target.

And many have made considerable progress since the beginning of the year.

There are eight countries and territories that have already vaccinated more than 60% of their populations.

In the first 3 months of 2022 alone, Nicaragua has increased coverage by 18%. Peru and Colombia have both expanded vaccination by 12%. And Bolivia and Venezuela have increased their vaccination coverage by nearly 10%.

But in some areas, vaccination has slowed or plateaued.

In the Caribbean, fewer than 30% of the population completed their primary series in Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and St. Lucia.

And across Latin America, Guatemala, Guyana, and Paraguay have yet to reach half of their populations.

We now have enough supplies of vaccines to meet demand everywhere in our Region.

As of this month, PAHO's Revolving Fund has delivered more than 141 million doses of COVID vaccines in partnership with COVAX and with the support of donors.

But we have learned that supply is just the first step and that is why PAHO is working closely with countries to also provide technical assistance, planning and communications support to fill the remaining gaps.

COVID-19 vaccines work and they are very safe. They are protecting most people in our Region from the worst consequences of COVID-19 infection.

We need to extend this benefit to everyone in the Americas.

There is no better time to do so than during Vaccination Week from April 23rd – April 30th, when health services across the Region will be mobilized to get vaccines out.

PAHO's recommendation is that we first ask caretakers and heads of families to use this moment to get their loved ones vaccinated and ensure that they are protected against not only COVID-19, but also other diseases.

If you or a family member have not been vaccinated against COVID-19, please talk to your healthcare provider about any questions or doubts that you may have.

They are here to help you work through your concerns and show you the importance of getting vaccinated.

If you are pregnant, now is the time to get your COVID-19 vaccine alongside your flu shot and tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis, or whooping cough, vaccine, to protect you and your child against these life-threatening diseases.

Parents should take this moment to get their children caught up on routine vaccines and shield them against diseases like measles, polio, and diphtheria.

Vaccination is a family affair, and it is up to all of us to make sure our loved ones are protected.

Second, we encourage countries to integrate their COVID-19 vaccination efforts with their routine immunization systems.

When we first rolled out COVID-19 vaccines, countries set up emergency systems to get these life-saving shots into arms as quickly as possible.

And now, we can leverage this infrastructure and merge it with our routine immunization systems to make it more convenient and accessible for families to catch up on all their shots at once. This month, for example, PAHO's Revolving Fund has delivered some 15 million doses of Influenza vaccine to 9 countries of the region that continue to strengthen their vaccination efforts.

Some countries, such as Mexico, Ecuador, and Bolivia, are already working to fully integrate their COVID-19 vaccination with routine immunizations.

We are learning valuable lessons from all of these efforts.

Countries must invest in increasing health staff so that there are enough qualified people to manage these dual responsibilities.

And we can continue engaging new and traditional partners, like community groups, religious organizations, universities, and the private sector to listen to the concerns of the communities and to develop effective vaccination strategies together.

Lastly, we urge countries to take advantage of Vaccination Week in the Americas and intensify their efforts to reach at least 70% of their population with COVID-19 vaccines.

Several more countries could reach this target even before June, if we increase the momentum.

And while we are expanding vaccination, we must make sure to reach the most vulnerable people, as they are the ones that can suffer the worst consequences from COVID-19.

Elderly people, those with pre-existing conditions or comorbidities, healthcare workers and pregnant women remain most at risk of ending up in our hospitals or dying due to COVID.

This is especially true for pregnant mothers. In some countries, COVID has become the number one cause of maternal deaths.

These deaths are avoidable. And the best way to do so is to expand vaccination coverage in pregnant women – at any stage of their pregnancy.

All countries need to focus on reaching these vulnerable populations to ensure that we save more lives and avoid overburdening our health systems with preventable cases.

The COVID vaccination effort has been the largest immunization program in history. It has shown us that success is possible when countries and people work together to embrace vaccines.

Our Region has achieved high coverage and delivered more than 1.77 billion vaccine doses into arms in only 16 months.

The upcoming Vaccination Week in the Americas is an opportunity to celebrate our progress and use what we've learned to advance coverage and save more lives. At the same time, we must continue consolidating vaccination coverage to ensure priority populations are fully vaccinated and educated about measures to follow to keep protecting themselves.

Let's use our knowledge and perseverance to protect as many people, and to save as many lives as possible.

We know how to get these vaccines out, and we must lose no energy and no time now.