

TAG RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COVID-19

Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), 2024

PAHO



Pan American
Health
Organization



World Health
Organization

Americas Region

Contents

2020 Recommendations	2
August	2
November	3
2021 Recommendations	5
Vaccine Hesitancy among Adults in the Caribbean.....	6
Communication and Demand for COVID-19 Vaccines	6
Regional ESAVI Surveillance System for COVID-19 Vaccines in The Americas	6
Statement of the TAG on COVID-19 Vaccines and Vaccination	7
2022 Recommendations	9
January	9
Recommendations for the Revolving Fund	12
July	13
2023 Recommendations	14

2020 Recommendations

August

- TAG urges PAHO to provide guidance to countries on the implementation of immunization catch-up and coverage recovery activities. TAG stresses that PAHO should adopt a more hands-on approach in accompanying these efforts. Strategically placed PAHO international field staff need to be continually supported and offered to countries. More specifically, countries should:
 - o Monitor the performance of immunization programs at national and subnational levels (including coverage, vaccine stocks and supplies, epidemiological and laboratory surveillance) and take data-driven actions to correct pitfalls.
- Prioritize vaccination as an essential health service and implement immunization strategies to reach all target populations, especially the underserved and vulnerable population groups.
- Take advantage of the universal health coverage approach to strengthen all components of the immunization program during the pandemic (micro-planning, human resources, training, information systems, among others). Countries should also implement integrated primary care strategies such as administration of anti-parasitic treatment or vitamins with vaccines.
- Sustain investments in epidemiological and laboratory surveillance of VPDs in the context of COVID-19 and leverage resources and systems in place for COVID-19 to strengthen VPD surveillance systems.
- Develop and implement social communication strategies to encourage the community to safely access vaccination services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Engage local communities in the planning of immunization coverage recovery activities and preparation for the successful implementation of a COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available.
- TAG urges PAHO to investigate the reasons for the secular trend in the decline of immunization coverage in the Americas and to share the findings with TAG, with a view on developing a sustainable strategy to strengthen immunization services and improve VPD control, including their continued elimination from the Region.
- With regards to access to SARS-CoV-2 vaccines, TAG encourages PAHO, with support from Member States, to assume a leadership role in the global governance processes related to COVID-19 vaccine procurement, allocation, and delivery.

- TAG recognizes the value of the COVAX Facility and commends countries in the Americas for expressing their interest in being represented as a single bloc by PAHO's Revolving Fund.
- TAG recommends that the PAHO Secretariat provide a briefing to PAHO's Directing Council on COVID vaccine and COVAX Facility development, with a special emphasis on the unresolved pricing and governance issues that threaten the future role of the Revolving Fund.
- TAG urges PAHO to finalize a regional plan for COVID-19 vaccination 2020-21 and set up an internal coordination mechanism (including country representatives, where relevant) to ensure timely and effective technical cooperation to countries for COVID-19 vaccine introduction and implementation.
- TAG urges countries to develop national plans for the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines, engaging NITAGs, as early as possible, in the process.
- Understanding that strong national immunization programs are the foundation for the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines, TAG encourages countries to strengthen their cold chain capacity, information systems, and vaccine safety surveillance, among others. Countries should consider delivering other vaccines concurrently, where and if possible and appropriate, with COVID-19 vaccines (e.g., delivery of influenza and pneumococcal vaccines).
- TAG urges PAHO and countries to lay the groundwork for demand generation for COVID-19 vaccination through community engagement and exploring mapping stakeholders' perceptions around future COVID-19 vaccination. Given the current spread of misinformation, TAG encourages countries to begin planning and budgeting for

November

- TAG notes the ongoing pandemic and the significant toll that it is taking and emphasizes the importance of non-pharmaceutical measures in reducing the transmission of COVID-19.
- TAG notes the critical importance of more effectively communicating how the force of infection that comes with surges or increased waves of infections results in increased case severity and mortality.
- TAG appreciates the work of both PAHO's team and national teams and encourages the continuation of efforts to improve vaccination coverage and increase the demand for vaccines, as well as efforts to improve the surveillance of communicable diseases relevant to vaccination.
- TAG notes the analysis on estimating the populations most at risk due to underlying conditions and sees the value of these estimates for COVID-19

response, as well as for allocation of the vaccine. It would be useful to explore which of the underlying conditions are most predictive of poor health outcomes, so that the prioritization and allocation of vaccines can be refined, where possible.

- TAG supports the adoption of the WHO SAGE values framework for the allocation and prioritization of COVID-19 vaccination and the Roadmap for Prioritizing Population Groups for Vaccines against COVID-19 and urges their use to guide country planning and decision-making.
- TAG encourages countries and stresses the need for them to begin their planning using the values framework and prioritization roadmap, and to involve the NITAGs and all stakeholders in a transparent process to plan for the administration of COVID-19 vaccines. It is important to engage all stakeholders and the public in a dialogue to build confidence in COVID-19 vaccines and those protecting against other diseases.
- TAG supports vaccinating health workers, the elderly, and adults with comorbidities as a priority to reduce morbidity and mortality due to SARS-CoV-2 infection.
- TAG stresses the importance of careful micro-planning, considering the specific characteristics of the COVID-19 vaccines that are available for use, with special attention to all aspects of the cold chain, logistics, and information systems (electronic or paper), including the provision of a vaccination registry to vaccinated persons.
- TAG notes the need to strengthen national capacities for ESAVI surveillance in relation to COVID-19 and other vaccines and supports the establishment of a regional ESAVI surveillance system.
- TAG recommends preparing special studies to monitor cohorts of vaccinated persons to determine the safety and duration of protection from COVID-19 vaccines. TAG also supports the establishment of a regional committee for COVID-19 vaccine safety.
- TAG emphasizes the critical role of communication, including social media and the identification and use of both national influencers and personalities, as well as regional champions and ambassadors, in promoting COVID-19 immunization once vaccines are available.
- TAG notes that the VIRAT tool is useful to monitor country preparedness and preparation of national vaccination plans, and TAG strongly supports the integration of the VIRAT tool and the World Bank's Vaccine Readiness Framework (VRAF) tool into one tool for monitoring country readiness and facilitating the preparation of national vaccine plans.

2021 Recommendations

- The TAG commends countries for their tremendous work in rolling out COVID-19 vaccines to help control the pandemic.
- The TAG is extremely concerned with the significant inequity in global access to vaccines and reaffirms the importance of the COVAX Facility and the PAHO Revolving Fund as key mechanisms to improve access to vaccines for low- and middle-income countries. Greater advocacy, coordination and action among immunization partners and political leaders are necessary to reduce this global inequity and promote justice for all.
- The TAG is also concerned with the significant disparities in the deployment and administration of vaccines between and within countries of the Region and recommends that greater attention be given to ensuring more equitable distribution of vaccines in keeping with our principles of Pan-Americanism and solidarity among countries.
- In view of the large COVID-19 vaccine deployments anticipated in Q4 2021 and 2022, governments should further strengthen planning and preparation, train their health workforce, expand their immunization staff where needed, install cold chain equipment (including ultra-cold chain where necessary), review and implement local micro plans, and update the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan.
- The TAG strongly advocates that governments should implement the SAGE roadmap for prioritization of COVID-19 vaccines and achieve high vaccination coverage among health and front-line workers, the elderly, and other high-risk groups before administering doses to adolescents (ages 12-15).
- Preliminary evidence suggests that natural immunity and vaccine immunity are effective in preventing severe disease, hospitalization, and death in those older than 1 year. At this juncture, it is not known how long immunity will last, and there may be breakthrough infections that are mild or asymptomatic in fully immunized individuals. In the context of limited vaccine supplies and the roadmap's recommendations, introducing booster doses of vaccines is not recommended at this time. Currently, in countries with high vaccine coverage,

most COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths occur among people who are unimmunized or only partially immunized, and seldom in those who are fully immunized.

- Where possible, countries should implement COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness studies and/or contribute their data to the regional surveillance network REVELAC-i (managed by PAHO) to add to the Region's understanding of vaccine performance.

Vaccine Hesitancy among Adults in the Caribbean

- The TAG commends PAHO and immunization programs for conducting a survey in the Caribbean sub-region to determine the acceptability of COVID-19 vaccines among healthcare workers, the reasons for any vaccine hesitancy, and for developing strategies to address them.
- The TAG encourages all countries to gather data on social and behavioral drivers for vaccination acceptance among different population segments, including healthcare workers, and to use these data to inform policies and strategies to increase vaccine uptake.

Communication and Demand for COVID-19 Vaccines

- The TAG strongly encourages governments to actively promote COVID-19 vaccines among their country's populations and to provide timely and accurate information on the vaccines' safety, effectiveness, and quality.
- The TAG strongly urges governments and international partners to work with healthcare workers to provide timely and accurate information, respond to their questions and concerns, and develop tools and materials to facilitate their work. The goal is to engage healthcare workers as advocates of COVID-19 immunization.
- The TAG recommends that governments organize coordinated communication campaigns and social engagement events to promote vaccination against COVID-19.
- The TAG recommends that with PAHO support, countries share lessons learned in rolling out vaccines to adult populations in real time and communicating effectively with sub-populations to address their concerns.
- The timing of promotional activities for COVID-19 must be carefully planned so community engagement activities coincide with the availability of vaccines in countries.

Regional ESAVI Surveillance System for COVID-19 Vaccines in The Americas

- TAG urges countries to establish or strengthen an electronic surveillance system for adverse events supposedly attributable to vaccines or immunization (ESAVIs); the system should be harmonized with the EPI and national regulatory agency data systems, and staff should be trained to use it. The goal is to collect ESAVI data specific to the Region (including for rare events) and calculate incidence rates of ESAVI associated with the COVID-19 vaccines used in the Americas.
- TAG also urges countries, in collaboration with PAHO, to estimate the background rates of events that may be associated with COVID-19 vaccines, in order to establish a Region-specific baseline and assess causality.
- All serious adverse events must be reported and investigated in a timely manner in order to identify associated risk factors and to estimate rates of their occurrence. National regulatory agencies must conduct timely causality assessments to determine whether an adverse event may have a causal link to a COVID-19 vaccine.
- Immunization and health staff must be trained to recognize the symptoms and signs of thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) and other serious adverse events potentially associated with COVID-19 vaccines, as well as the contraindications for the different vaccines being used.
- The TAG recommends that countries develop simple and effective messages to communicate with the public about adverse events, provide timely information on new types of events, and ensure transparency where a causal association is established with one or more COVID-19 vaccine(s).
- The TAG emphasizes the SAGE's recommendation that persons experiencing a TTS event should not receive the second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine.
- In the event of a TTS event following the first dose of AstraZeneca vaccine, countries should strongly consider completing the vaccination series with an mRNA vaccine.

Statement of the TAG on COVID-19 Vaccines and Vaccination

- The Secretariat asks TAG members to use this session to review the available evidence on the “hot topics” of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccination and provide recommendations to Member States on how to address each topic in Latin America and the Caribbean
- TAG recommends that countries update their National Deployment and Vaccination Plans to align with the updated SAGE roadmap. Health and front-line workers, the elderly and other high-risk population groups should be prioritized for COVID-19 vaccination. The primary goal is to further reduce severe morbidity and mortality from COVID-19. Countries need to ensure that they have adequate

plans and preparation for the arrival of large quantities of vaccine doses in Q4 2021 and 2022.

- The TAG recommends that all pregnant and breastfeeding women receive the COVID-19 vaccine. COVID-19 morbidity and mortality rates among pregnant women are significantly higher in the Americas compared to other WHO regions, indicating that the benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks. Where SARS-CoV-2 transmission is limited, pregnant women should be vaccinated after their first trimester. Pregnant adolescents should be encouraged to receive the vaccine.
- Adolescents who do not have a high-risk comorbidity should not be included in the national vaccination plan at this time. Vaccination with a COVID-19 vaccine is not a pre-requisite for children or adolescents returning to school.
- The TAG agrees with SAGE that immunocompromised persons should receive the COVID-19 vaccine. It is, however, advisable to delay vaccination in persons who are severely immunocompromised due to chemotherapy, radiation or active disease until they have recovered some immunity.
- The TAG considers the scientific evidence for the use of some mixed vaccine schedules to be limited, and maintains that it is best to use the same vaccine for the 1st and 2nd doses.
- Nonetheless, in situations of reduced vaccine availability and sustained community transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the TAG agrees with the SAGE recommendation that countries may consider using ChAdOx1-S [recombinant] products followed by a mRNA platform vaccine (i.e., BNT162b2, mRNA-1273).
- The TAG believes it is essential to deliver the first dose of vaccine to as many people as possible to reduce severe COVID-19 and mortality. To be fully protected, it also is important for persons to complete the 2-dose series with the same vaccine. There is preliminary data to suggest that delaying the second dose of AstraZeneca vaccine beyond 12 weeks elicits an effective immune response. With respect to Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, there are limited data about delaying the second dose of those vaccines beyond 4 weeks. Extended intervals between vaccine doses should be considered only in situations where vaccine supply is limited.
- The TAG strongly recommends that countries in the Region invest in designing and implementing vaccine effectiveness studies, especially for vaccines and circulating strains for which there are limited data, in order to collect information to guide COVID-19 vaccine use in the Region. The data will help improve confidence in the vaccines.

2022 Recommendations

January

- **Questions for the TAG**
- Does the TAG endorse the updated SAGE Roadmap?
 - If yes, how can countries of the Americas adapt the SAGE Roadmap based on their current: Vaccination coverage rate among the different priority groups; National policy on booster dose
 - If yes, how can PAHO support the TAG's recommendation on the use of COVID-19 vaccine in priority groups of the Americas (primary series and booster doses)?
 - If no, what is TAG's recommended strategy for COVID-19 vaccine prioritization in the Americas?
- In July 2021, the TAG declared that the Region was facing an impending crisis around vaccination services, and that ongoing attention must be given to sustaining and strengthening immunization, epidemiological surveillance, and other essential health programs. The Region continues to report its lowest levels of vaccination coverages for measles and DPT3 in the last 10 years. Also, Polio3 coverage for the Region in 2020 was only 82%, which is the lowest reported coverage since polio eradication in the Americas in 1994. Furthermore, the rate of reported AFP cases/100,000 children decreased by 39% in 2020 when compared to 2019. The Region's risk of outbreaks of previously controlled vaccine-preventable diseases is at its highest during the last 30 years, in the event of continuous measles/rubella transmission, WPV/VDPV importation or VDPV emergence. While countries must continue to manage the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, they must reinvigorate their national immunization programs to close vaccine coverage gaps, reach all eligible persons, and promote the benefits of vaccinations for universal health. Failure to act now will result in outbreaks and continued low coverages of vaccines, which will significantly damage health and economies.
- Considering the anticipated intensified influenza activity in the Northern and Southern Regions of the Americas in 2022, countries using the vaccine composition for the Southern hemisphere should carefully plan and implement influenza vaccination activities in the first quarter of 2022. These activities should include the Vaccination Week in the Americas, which has proven to be a strong platform to achieve high vaccination coverage rates against influenza across age groups.

- After two years of almost exclusive focus on COVID-19 response operations, many indicators of healthcare performance, access and quality of services have declined. If this decreasing trend continues, further impacts in services and healthcare staff burn-out are anticipated, resulting in further burden and loss of life from various health conditions. The TAG urges countries to start considering the potential need for longer term COVID-19 vaccination operations, to start strategic planning now, and to ensure the integration of COVID-19 vaccination activities in the routine national immunization programs.
- The TAG commends countries and their health staff and frontline workers for their concerted response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines. The Region of the Americas has succeeded in achieving 64.5% of their population being fully vaccinated by 11 February 2022. However, 14 countries of the Americas did not reach 40% COVID-19 vaccine coverage by 31 December 2021, leaving large portions of their population at risk for severe disease, hospitalization, and death due to COVID-19.
- The TAG strongly urges PAHO and other partners and stakeholders to provide additional financial and technical support to countries with low vaccination coverage rates. This support may include the provision of COVID-19 vaccine doses, technical support and deployment of personnel to support vaccine roll-out operations and provide relief to already exhausted field staff, purchase and maintenance of cold chain equipment, training activities to expand the health work force. Also, TAG recommends that PAHO and other technical partners expand field assessments and community engagement operations to understand the root cause of low COVID vaccine uptake.
 - The TAG endorses the WHO-SAGE Roadmap for prioritizing use of COVID-19 vaccines, in its most recent update from 21 January 2022, as an approach to optimize the global impact of COVID -19 vaccines, based on public health goals, global and national equity, and vaccine access and coverage scenarios, and emphasizes the following guidance: a. Countries with low rates¹ of primary series coverage should first achieve high primary series coverage rates among the higher-risk priority groups (i.e., older adults, health workers and immunocompromised persons) before offering vaccine doses to lower risk priority groups.
 - b. Countries with moderate-to-high primary series coverage rate in higher-risk priority groups should usually prioritize available vaccine supply to first achieve high booster dose coverage rates in higher risk priority groups before offering vaccine doses to lower priority groups.

- The TAG notes with concern that many countries do not collect information on the age and population subgroup of vaccinated persons. Therefore, the TAG strongly recommends that countries collect and compile COVID-19 vaccination data with stratification by age, sex and geographic area. The collection of other descriptors (e.g., health care workers, pregnant women) will enable further refinement of programmatic activities and guide vaccine prioritization operations. All required data points should be included in the COVID-19 vaccination electronic joint report form (eJRF) form that they already share weekly with PAHO.
- Pregnant women have been identified among the groups at high risk for severe disease and death from COVID-19, and COVID-19 burden in pregnant and lactating women in the Region is significant. The WHO-SAGE Roadmap reinforces that target women are a high-priority group for COVID-19 vaccination. Yet, vaccination rates for this particular priority group remain low across the Region. The TAG urges Member States to refocus efforts to vaccinate pregnant women, including pregnant adolescents.
- Almost all countries of the Americas have introduced COVID-19 booster doses for selected population groups. The TAG welcomes the publication of the updated WHO-SAGE Roadmap for prioritizing COVID-19 vaccines and offers additional guidance for the timing and use of booster doses in countries of the Americas.
 - Countries with low to medium vaccination coverage rate¹: All efforts should be made to achieve high coverage with a primary series and booster among highest-and high-risk groups.²
 - Countries with high to very high vaccination coverage rate¹:
 - Countries that introduced a booster dose policy for all persons aged 18 or older should conduct a subnational analysis of the vaccination coverage rates by risk priority groups to ensure that highest and high priority groups receive a primary vaccination series and a booster.
 - Countries that introduced a booster dose policy for highest risk priority groups only should conduct national and subnational analyses to determine when and how to expand the use of booster doses in the national COVID-19 vaccination strategy.
- The TAG salutes the support of donor countries, which contributed more than 28 million COVID- 19 vaccine doses to the Americas and continue to provide financial support for various activities required for COVID-19 vaccine roll-out. On behalf of the people of the Americas, the TAG recognizes the important contributions of the United States, Spain, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.

- The TAG recognizes PAHO's strong technical support on COVID-19 vaccine deployment and introduction in 2021 and urges the Organization to maintain its high level of engagement.
- The children of the Americas continue to face the worst educational crisis of the last century, with millions of children yet to return to the classroom. The TAG strongly urges countries to reopen schools and resume in-person learning, while reinforcing recommended public health and social measures (such as mask wearing, social distancing and ensuring adequate ventilation). Teachers and educational personnel are among high-priority groups for COVID-19 vaccination and should be prioritized for vaccination. The TAG echoes the words of the WHO's General Director and PAHO's Director, as well as UNICEF recommendations in stating that vaccination of children and adolescents should not be a prerequisite for school reopening.
- Regardless of the SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern in circulation, non-pharmaceutical public health and social measures continue to be effective and recommended strategies to reduce virus transmission and minimize the burden of COVID-19 in the society. The TAG urges countries to maintain these measures and integrate them into the national response strategy as one of the most important tools to mitigate the impact and minimize the effects of the pandemic.

Recommendations for the Revolving Fund

- The TAG recognizes the efforts made by the COVAX Facility to support global and regional access, allocation and deployment of COVID-19 vaccines. However, TAG urges the COVAX Facility to take advantage of the mechanisms of the Revolving Fund to deliver vaccine doses to the countries of the Americas.
- With improved supply of COVID-19 vaccine doses expected to be available in 2022, and the potential for shifting from a supply-based to a demand-based allocation approach, the TAG urges Member States to work in close partnership with the PAHO Revolving Fund and its technical units to evaluate national vaccine demand, monitor absorption and service delivery dynamics.
- As countries advance with COVID-19 vaccination, TAG reinforces the importance of PAHO Member States transitioning their supply sources from bilateral agreements to the procurement of WHO-approved COVID-19 vaccines through the PAHO Revolving Fund, to achieve improved economies of scale for the mutual benefit of the countries and reinforce Pan-Americanism and Solidarity, as it is the case with other vaccines.
- TAG urges Member States to improve immunization supply chain systems and cold chain infrastructure to ensure effective delivery of COVID-19 and other vaccines. Investing in better immunization supply chains along with achieving

sustainable and affordable access to routine vaccinations and will be critical to advancing pandemic preparedness. TAG also urges Member States to seek active support from PAHO technical units and the Revolving Fund for immunization supply chain strengthening.

July

- In accordance with WHO guidelines, countries must further reduce the number of persons in the Americas who have not received the primary series of COVID-19 vaccination. Countries should focus resources on high-risk priority groups such as the elderly, health workers and immunocompromised persons to reach 100% coverage with both primary series and booster doses to minimize hospitalization and death from COVID-19. Countries must achieve at least 70% vaccination coverage with primary series in the general population. At the same time, TAG recommends that government authorities reinstitute public health and social measures (i.e., mask wearing in crowded or closed locations, hand hygiene, social distancing) to minimize the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the population according to the epidemiological situation.

2023 Recommendations

- The TAG strongly supports the SAGE’s recommendation that countries should maintain their focus on achieving high vaccination coverage among high priority risk groups. This includes older adults, pregnant women, persons with comorbidities, immunocompromised persons, and health workers.
- Increasing the coverage rate of the primary series has a greater impact on reducing hospitalizations and deaths, compared to using the equivalent vaccine supply to increase the coverage rate of booster doses.
- Specifically:
 - Countries can reduce their morbidity and mortality rates by ensuring that all persons receive at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine.
 - For inactivated COVID-19 vaccines (i.e., vaccines produced by Bharat, Sinovac, Sinopharm, and Valneva), two doses are required for the initial vaccine series.
 - People in the high priority groups have the highest chance of becoming seriously ill or dying. Any decrease in vaccine effectiveness, however small, increases the number of persons who experience severe illness or death. Therefore, revaccination with booster doses is recommended only for persons in the high priority groups.
 - For persons who have not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19, any of the WHO Emergency Use Listing (EUL) COVID-19 vaccines can be used for the initial dose, including monovalent XBB vaccines.
- Variant-adapted vaccines – particularly for the time being, monovalent XBB vaccines – are likely to provide some additional benefit to the index-virus only vaccines. Nonetheless, countries should not delay implementing vaccination while waiting for access to variant-containing vaccines. There is greater benefit in ensuring that persons at high risk of developing severe COVID-19 receive a dose than extending this interval in anticipation of a variant-containing vaccine.
- COVID-19 infection remains one of the leading causes of respiratory disease and death in the

Americas. PAHO welcomes the updated WHO Roadmap on COVID-19 vaccination. Any of the WHO Emergency Use Listing (EUL) COVID-19 vaccines, including monovalent XBB vaccines, can be used for the initial dose and for revaccination. The priority use groups are the oldest adults, older adults with comorbidities, pregnant women, healthcare workers, and immunocompromised persons.