
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—25 NOV 2020

25 NOVEMBER 2020

Good morning, thank you for joining today's press briefing.

Since the start of the pandemic, there have been more than 25 million cases and more than 700,000 deaths due to COVID-19 in our region. Since our press conference last week, more than 1.5 million cases were reported in the Americas—the highest weekly numbers since the start of the pandemic.

And while a rapid surge of infections in the United States has been a major driver, cases are continuing to accelerate in some countries of North, Central and South America as part of a mosaic of different epidemiological patterns we're seeing.

In Canada, infections are rising, particularly among the elderly. The virus is also reaching high numbers among indigenous communities, which are especially vulnerable due to their remote locations and challenging access to health infrastructure.

In Central America, Panama reported its highest weekly case count since the beginning of the pandemic. As epidemiological information is delayed in many countries impacted by recent hurricanes in Central America, we remain concerned about the potential for outbreaks in overcrowded shelters.

Throughout the Eastern Caribbean, cases are rising, particularly in Saint Lucia, which has reported an outbreak originating in the crew of a docked cargo ship.

And in South America, the recent case increases in some states of Brazil is continuing. The dramatic rise of cases in some departments of Uruguay, the only country of South America not reporting community transmission, is an example of how quickly the situation can evolve in all of the sub regions of the continent.

Many people are understandably encouraged by recent developments in the search for an effective COVID-19 vaccine, but we must continue to be patient and cautious because it will be months before a vaccine is widely available. That's why it's critical that everyone continue to practice the public health measures that we know are effective in controlling the spread of the virus:

- Wearing a mask in public, including in the presence of persons from other households;
- Keeping a safe distance from others;
- Avoiding the 3Cs: spaces that are closed, crowded or involve close contact with others; and
- Washing our hands often.

These measures are especially important as we enter the holiday season.

In the Americas, the holidays usher in some of our most cherished traditions. Our towns and cities come to life with decorations, communities congregate to mark religious celebrations and generations of families come together to give thanks.

After months of staying at home, many of us are weighing difficult decisions about whether to see friends, gather with family or travel to see loved ones during the holidays.

So today, I'd like to provide some advice on how to celebrate responsibly this holiday season.

First, all of us must remember an important truth: during a pandemic, there is no such thing as a risk-free holiday season. Every gathering, every shopping trip, and every travel plan increases the chances of spreading the virus.

So, we urge everyone to weigh their options carefully, and follow the guidance of national health authorities. Despite the risks, there are a few common measures we all can take to make the holidays as safe as possible.

Let's start with mass gatherings, which are treasured cultural traditions.

Communities across our region are grappling with choices about whether to host religious processions, holiday markets and church celebrations.

PAHO and WHO recommend that countries experiencing widespread transmission of the virus should seriously consider postponing or reducing mass gatherings. This is NOT the time to be hosting ANY large gatherings.

Each country, city and community should base decisions about hosting public events on the latest available data – especially data that show where the virus is spreading and whether health systems have enough capacity to keep up with cases. Regardless of location, religious services should look differently this year. They should be held outdoors whenever possible or limited in size when it's not.

It's also important to talk about smaller indoor gatherings.

Indoor gatherings, even smaller ones, can be especially risky because they bring together groups of people, young and old, from different households, who may not all be adhering to the same infection prevention measures. They should be held outside when possible, and participants should wear masks and maintain social distance. If held indoors, limiting group size and choosing well-ventilated areas can help reduce exposure.

And although it may feel awkward to wear masks and practice social distancing when we're around friends and family, doing so is the best way to ensure everyone remains safe and healthy.

Finally, it's important to talk about traveling.

It goes without saying that the safest option for everyone is to stay at home, but we know some people have made the decision to travel this holiday season. Many may be thinking that testing will help them travel safely. COVID-19 tests are an important tool for tracking and tackling the spread of the virus, but we must be careful that testing does not give us a false sense of security.

It can take a few days before a diagnostic test can detect a COVID-19 infection, so if a test is done too soon, a person can test negative while still being infected and contagious to others. And because these tests are typically done a few days prior to travel, a traveler could still be exposed to the virus in the days leading to their departure.

Because of these realities, PAHO does NOT recommend relying on laboratory tests for travelers. Yet we've seen countries across our region and throughout the world place testing at the heart of their travel policies. This cannot guarantee safe travel or eliminate the risks related to infected travelers, and resources can be used in other ways yielding a greater public health impact.

Tests are expensive, hard to implement and have limited impact in controlling the international spread of the virus. At the same time, they waste precious resources and divert limited staff from necessary functions, like contact tracing.

We are pleased to see that some countries in our region are relying on more commonsense measures – such as using data about how the virus spreading – to continually reassess their travel guidance. We hope other countries follow their lead.

To make travel safer, all countries should collectively work to prevent from travelling those who have COVID-19 and are in isolation, as well as their contacts who are in quarantine. And while it's important to monitor travelers for 14 days after arrival, travelers should not be placed under quarantine or subject to movement restrictions.

The holiday season is a time for family, community and renewal. And while this year may look different, that doesn't mean we cannot make the most of it. Throughout the pandemic, our region has reimagined how people work, go to school and participate in civic life, so that we can keep our friends and families as safe and healthy as possible.

The holidays should be no different.

People are planning virtual dinners, broadcasting virtual celebrations and opting for smaller ceremonies, even if means making personal sacrifices. The individual decisions we make this holiday season won't just affect the people closest to us, they will also impact our communities.

Solidarity has been the engine of our region's response to COVID-19, and it will be more important than ever during the holidays. If we work together, make sacrifices and keep each other safe, we can ensure a better, brighter start to the new year.