
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—28 APRIL 2021

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A very good morning and thanks for joining today's press briefing.

Over the past week, more than 1.4 million people became infected with COVID in our region and more than 36,000 lives were lost from COVID-related complications. In fact, one in four COVID deaths reported worldwide last week took place right here in the Americas.

Many health systems – especially those in South and Central America – are still struggling to cope with the influx of patients.

Since the beginning of 2021, several countries in our region are reporting an increase in cases in the younger population, linked to increased exposure and no vaccination in these groups. This has led to an increase in hospitalizations. The hospital stay of these age groups is usually greater compared to those over the age of 60, so PAHO is orienting our countries to plan on coping with sudden increases in the consumption of critical inputs such as oxygen, intubation drugs, personal protective equipment, and infusion pumps.

Canada's infection rates have surpassed U.S. figures for the first time in the pandemic.

Cases are also surging across the Caribbean as Guadeloupe, Martinique, and the Bahamas are reporting new spikes. Anguilla reported more than 60% of its total cases in the last seven days and weekly cases doubled in Puerto Rico during the same period.

Nearly every country in Central America is reporting a rise in infections. Hospitalizations are at an all-time high in Costa Rica, and we expect more patients will require care as the country reported a 50% jump in cases in the last week. Guatemala's hospitals have also reached maximum capacity.

Infections are spiking across South America. Infections in Colombia will soon reach January levels, and ICU beds are running out in major metropolitan cities like Bogota and Medellin. Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and Uruguay are also reporting a rise in infections.

It's no surprise then that many countries in our region have tightened public health measures by extending curfews, limiting re-openings, and imposing new stay-at-home orders.

Of course, these decisions are never easy, but based on how infections are surging, this is exactly what needs to happen. We know these measures work and I commend leaders across our region for putting health first.

As of this week, more than 317 million COVID vaccine doses have been administered across 49 countries and territories in our region.

Of these, nearly 7 million have been purchased via COVAX and another 470,000 are en route to some other countries.

In the next few weeks, countries should receive their second COVAX shipments. And while doses remain limited, most countries should see a considerable increase in doses from the first wave.

Based on the allocation criteria established by the COVAX Facility, nine countries in our region are starting the second deployment, to be followed by others in the same sequence as for the first deployment. Nearly 7 million COVID vaccines will be arriving in these countries between May-June.

The first COVAX shipments were an important opportunity to troubleshoot issues before deliveries accelerate. As we ready ourselves for the second COVAX deliveries, it's worth raising three encouraging lessons that we've learned.

- Prioritize health services and save lives: While vaccination plans differ by country, most have done a great job following WHO and PAHO recommendations at prioritizing early doses for health workers and others on the frontlines and saving thousands of lives protecting the elderly and persons with underlying conditions.
- Public health measures: Because supplies remain limited, vaccinations alone will not end the pandemic, and they need to be complemented with proven public health measures to reduce deaths and protect health systems. We need to continue to wash our hands, wear our masks and maintain social distancing.
- Third, investments pay off: In anticipation of the arrival of COVID vaccines, many countries in our region invested in their cold chain equipment and capacity. Today, we're seeing these improvements pay off as deliveries have been quickly put to use – even for vaccines requiring ultra-low refrigeration. As deliveries pick up pace, our cold chain and supply chains will be tested further, but they are ready for the challenge.
- Experience Shows that countries across the Americas have adapted COVID immunization campaigns to prioritize safety by designating COVID vaccination sites away from clinics and hospitals, organizing drive-through sites, and hosting door-to-door campaigns to reduce the chance of transmission. Thanks to these efforts, our region has administered nearly every COVAX dose that it has received thus far.

Our region has demonstrated that it can successfully distribute covid vaccines quickly and effectively. Yet supplies are still far behind that is this region's urgent need for more doses.

That's why we urge countries with extra doses to consider donating a significant portion of these to the Americas, where these life-saving doses are desperately needed and will be promptly used.

Vaccines are especially important for vulnerable populations, like our migrants and the millions living along our borders, where we've seen outbreaks surge and ripple across our region.

Expanded vaccination will also ensure that our people and economies can begin to reopen, rebuild, and recover. With the increasing incidence of COVID-19 variants of concern, timing is critical.

But while our eyes are set on covid vaccinations, we are observing vaccination week in the Americas, so we must not forget the importance of maintaining our routine immunizations.

Last year, nearly 500,000 fewer children in the Americas were vaccinated for diseases like diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis. And more than 300,000 missed their measles vaccinations. These trends aren't new because for some years, we've seen immunization coverage decline in our region.

Lockdown measures have been challenging, and some parents remain fearful of taking their children to a doctor.

However, our health systems are well-prepared to deliver routine immunization safely and, in most places, childhood vaccines are being administered separately from covid-related care. So, children must not skip their shots. Parent please be aware.

I'd like to wrap up today's briefing by celebrating the work of our health workers, who throughout the course of this week, will vaccinate almost 100 million people against preventable diseases like measles, influenza and human papillomavirus, and will at the same time administer nearly 9 million doses of covid vaccines across 31 countries and territories in the Americas.

Our health workers have made extraordinary personal sacrifices and persevered even under the most challenging circumstances. We owe it to them to do everything that we can to keep ourselves and our communities safe – including by getting vaccinated when it's your turn.