



Pan American
Health
Organization



World Health
Organization
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE
Americas

Epidemiological Alert

Rational use of COVID-19 diagnostic tests

10 January 2022

In the context of the rapid increase in COVID-19 cases following a sudden increase in the use of COVID-19 diagnostic tests in several countries within and outside of the Americas Region, the Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) recommends Member States to take appropriate measures for the rational use of diagnostic tests and thus ensure their provision for both surveillance and medical care.

Rational use of COVID-19 diagnostic tests in the context of Omicron transmission

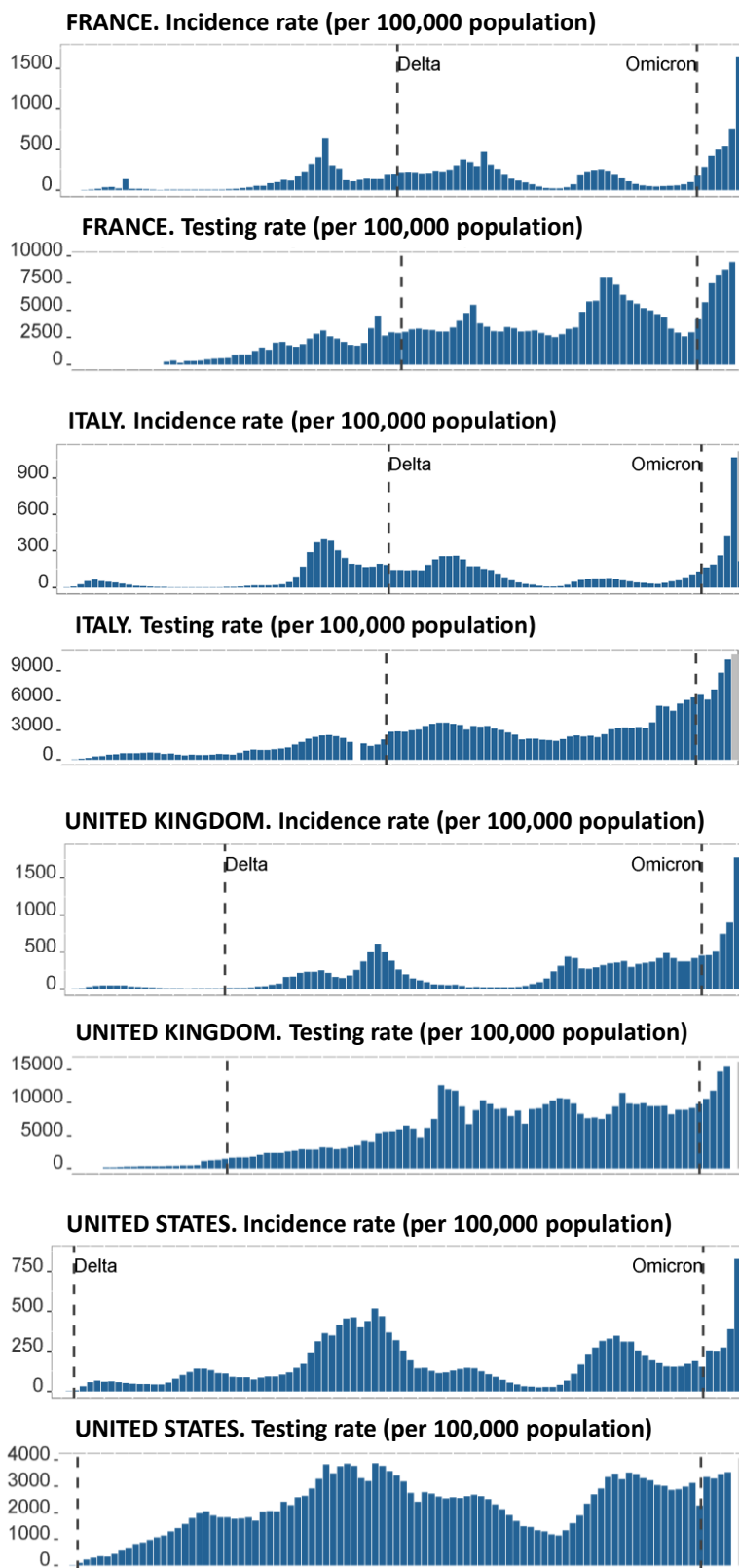
Since epidemiological week (EW) 40 of 2021, there has been an increasing trend in COVID-19 cases in several countries in Europe and more recently in the Region of the Americas. In some countries, the increase in cases reported at the end of the year exceeded the historical peaks reported throughout the pandemic (**Figure 1**). Indeed, during the last week of 2021, a total 9.7 million cases of COVID-19 were reported globally, representing an increase of 72% compared to the previous week and the highest number of weekly reported since the beginning of the pandemic.

This rapid and large increase in cases has been occurring amidst the emergence of the Omicron variant of concern (VOC) which has already spread to 149 countries and territories within a span of six weeks and is steadily displacing the Delta variant as the dominant VOC in a number of these countries and territories.

Simultaneously, several countries are also reporting influenza outbreaks, mainly due to influenza A (H3N2). Accordingly, the demand for diagnostic tests has reached levels never seen before, causing a shortage of laboratory equipment and diagnostic tests in several countries. This epidemiological scenario may persist and / or extend to more countries and territories.

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Figure 1. Incidence of cases and testing rates for COVID-19 (per 100,000 population) by epidemiological week (EW) of report and country -- France, Italy, United Kingdom, and United States -- as of EW 53 of 2021.



Source: Data from Our World in Data and reproduced by PAHO/WHO. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>. Accessed on 4 January 2022.

Respiratory syndrome can be caused by various etiological agents, with different degrees of severity in some specific groups that may require different clinical management. The specific diagnosis of the etiologic agent is key for both surveillance and clinical management, either in terms of period of time for isolation or specific treatment.

Guidance for national authorities

Given that the current epidemiological situation is characterized by a rapid increase in the number of cases and the subsequent sudden increase in the use of diagnostic tests, the Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization recommend Member States in implementing prioritization criteria for the use of COVID-19 diagnostic tests in setting with limited availability of testing. The recommendation is valid for both rapid antigen tests and molecular tests (RT-PCR).

PAHO/WHO recommends Member States prioritize use of COVID-19 diagnostic tests for the following:

- All cases that require hospitalization due to respiratory symptoms.
- Patient with respiratory symptoms that are among at risk groups for worsening disease.
- Health professionals with respiratory symptoms (to allow guidance on time to return to work).
- Patients who need to be hospitalized for other reasons, to detect COVID-19 according to the regulations of each country/territory and each institution.
- Professionals with respiratory symptoms who are part of essential and face-to-face services, such as security professionals (to allow guidance on the time to return to work).

Situations where testing is **NOT** recommended:

- Asymptomatic individuals (including contacts).
- As a requirement to get out of isolation
- To access public places


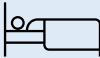





It is important to note that the most effective prevention measures continue to be complete vaccination, the correct use of masks, avoiding crowds, and maintaining open and well-ventilated environments.

Although the use of laboratory tests is NOT recommended as a requirement for international travelers, some countries require them as part of their entry protocols to the country and therefore the increased demand may also generate shortages at the national and global level.

While some countries have authorized the use of home tests (self-tests), at this moment, PAHO/WHO does not recommend this approach because there isn't enough evidence currently to support its impact on transmission control. On the contrary, a sample taken inappropriately by an untrained person, for example in someone without symptoms or someone using a low-quality test, can generate false negative results. This could then lead to a false sense of security among infected persons with the incorrect results, leading to lax observation of public health and social distancing measures and likely overall increase in transmission in the community.

PAHO/WHO continues to reiterate and update recommendations to support all Member States on management and protection measures for COVID-19 and reiterates the general recommendations included in the PAHO/WHO Epidemiological Alerts and Updates on COVID-19 available at: <https://www.paho.org/en/epidemiological-alerts-and-updates>.

The following are guidance, scientific reports, and other resources published by PAHO/WHO and WHO.

<p>Surveillance, rapid response teams, and case investigation</p> 	<p>Clinical management</p> 
<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/30zimCj</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/36DJi3B</p>	<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3li6wQB</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3sadTxQ</p>
<p>Laboratory</p> 	<p>Infection prevention and control</p> 
<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3d3TJ1g</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3oD2Qen</p>	<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3d2ckuV</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3nwyOaN</p>
<p>Critical preparedness and response</p> 	<p>Travel, Points of entry, and border health</p> 
<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3ljWHBT</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/36DJi3B</p>	<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3ivDivW</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/36DJi3B</p>
<p>Schools, workplaces, & other institutions</p> 	<p>Other resources</p>
<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3d66iJO</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/36DJi3B</p>	<p>WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/33zXgRQ</p> <p>PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/36DJi3B</p>

References

1. PAHO/WHO. Detection and diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 in the context of the circulation of the Omicron variant of concern (VOC), 30 November 2021. Washington, D.C.: PAHO/WHO; 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3GtDmcB>
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4. WHO advice for international traffic in relation to the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant (B.1.1.529), 30 November 2021. COVID-19 Travel Advice. Geneva: WHO; 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3laHi39>
5. WHO Enhancing Readiness for Omicron (B.1.1.529): Technical Brief and Priority Actions for Member States. 23 December 2021. Technical Document. Geneva. WHO; 2021. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3GdilgD>