



Epidemiological Alert: Organization of healthcare services in the context of high respiratory virus circulation including SARS-CoV-2 21 January 2022

In the context of the increase in COVID-19 cases in the Region of the Americas, along with the high circulation of other respiratory viruses, there has been an observed increase in the burden on healthcare systems and services. In this respect, the Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) recommends Member States to take measures to adequately prepare health services to cope with a high influx of patients, including maintaining supplies, effectively managing patients and resources, and mitigate absenteeism by protecting healthcare workers' health.

Background

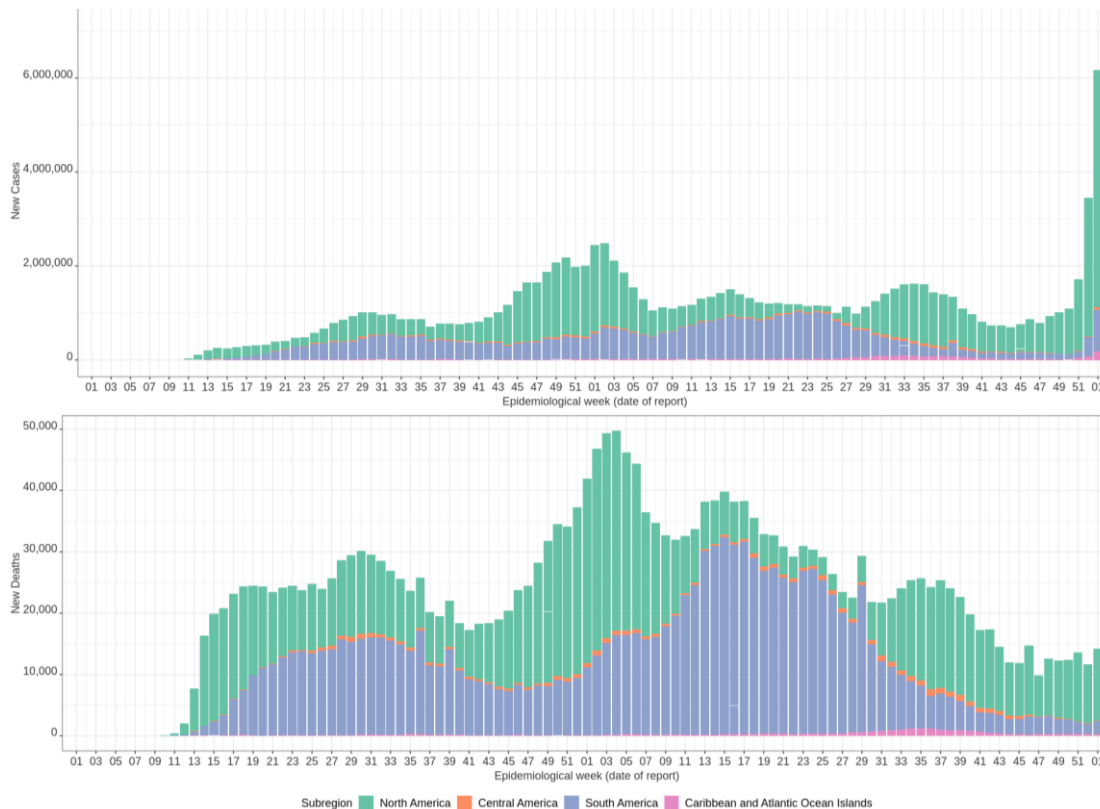
A new wave of COVID-19 has been observed in several countries in the Region of the Americas since December 2021, with many cases reported in a very short period. Since epidemiological week (EW) 51 of 2021, the number of new cases each week in the Region of the Americas have almost doubled, from 1.7 million new cases in EW 51 of 2021, to 3.4 million new cases in EW 52 of 2021, to 6.2 million new cases in EW 1 of 2022. In EW 2 of 2022, a total of 8.2 million new cases were reported in the Region, marking the highest number of weekly cases reported during the entire pandemic.

Furthermore, the substantial increase in cases since the end of 2021 has been observed across all four subregions in the Region of the Americas (**Figure 1**). Between 1 December 2021 and 14 January 2022, the COVID-19 doubling time (the amount of time for the number of cases to double) has been shortened to as little as 1.7-5 days in several countries (**Figure 2**).

To date, 41 countries and territories in the Americas have reported the detection of the SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern (VOC) Omicron, contributing to the increase in new cases, and hospitalizations.

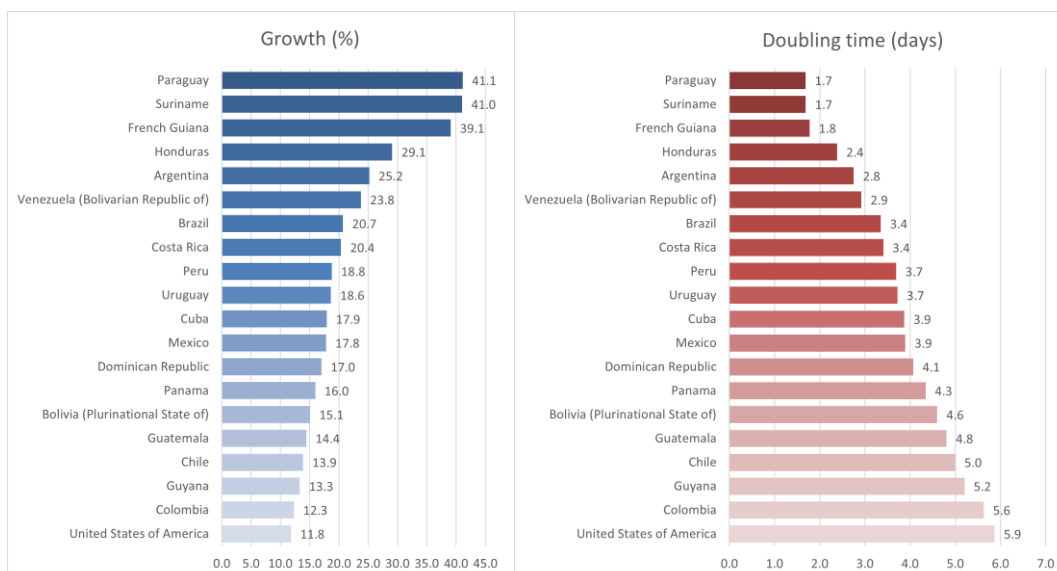
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Figure 1. COVID-19 cases and deaths by epidemiological week (EW) of report and subregion. Region of the Americas. 2020-2022 (as of EW 2).



Source: PAHO/WHO database using the WHO table accessed on 19 January 2022.

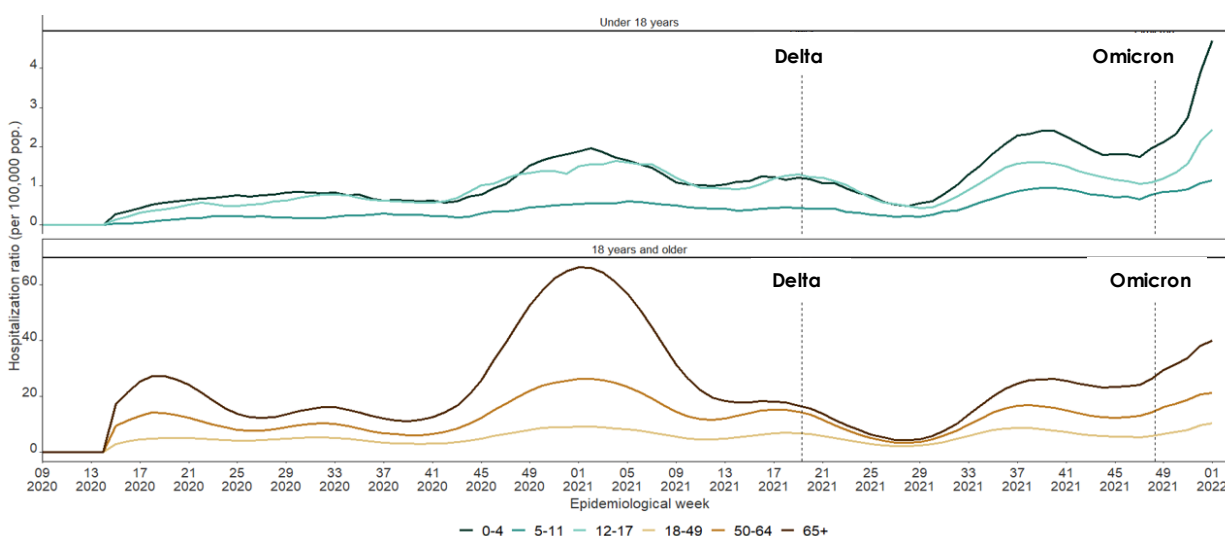
Figure 2. Growth rate (%) and doubling time (in days) of COVID-19 cases. Top 20 countries based on growth rate. Region of the Americas. 1 December 2021 to 14 January 2022.



Source: WHO data (covid19.who.int/table) accessed 14 January 2022

Simultaneously, several countries in the Region are also experiencing influenza outbreaks, primarily due to influenza A(H3N2). The result of this increased circulation of respiratory viruses including SARS-CoV-2, has led to an increased burden on the healthcare system. For COVID-19, there has been an increase in hospitalizations observed in several countries across all subregions. Between EW 51-EW 52 of 2021 and EW 1-EW 2 of 2022, 26 of 35 countries in the Region of the Americas with available data observed an increase in hospitalizations. In some countries such as the **United States of America**, an increase in hospitalizations has been observed among under 18-year-olds, particularly among 0 to 4-year-olds followed by 12 to 17-year-olds (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Hospitalization rates adjusted per 100,000 population by age group and epidemiological week (EW). United States of America. 2020-2022 (as of EW 1).



Source: United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC) COVID-Net Hospitalization Network. Accessed on 19 January 2022. Available at: <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#covidnet-hospitalization-network>.

Note: There may be a lag in reporting, which could result in limitations and differences in interpreting the trends. These data were obtained from US CDC COVID-Net, a network of over 250 acute-care hospitals in 14 states in the United States.

Furthermore, in several countries, hospitalizations due to chronic disease, trauma, or other infectious diseases have also been increasing, and some of the elective procedures have resumed as it is not possible to continue to postpone them.

As the increase of COVID-19 cases and circulation of other respiratory viruses continues in many countries in the Americas, absenteeism of health care workers is also impacting the healthcare services; therefore, efforts should continue for preparing healthcare services to cope with a high influx of COVID-19 cases with moderate or severe clinical symptoms and a potential shortage of healthcare professionals. This should include maintaining supplies, effectively managing patients and resources, and mitigate absenteeism by protecting healthcare workers' health with a holistic approach.

Guidance for national authorities


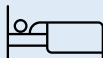
Since December 2021 the Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization (PAHO / WHO) has shared a series of guidance related surveillance, use of test, vaccination






and preparedness in the context of Omicron circulation. With this Alert we would like to share some practical advice on aspects that should be consider in the organization of the health care services to cope with high influx of patients.

- All healthcare workers should be prioritized for vaccinations, including booster doses;
- All healthcare workers should wear N95 masks, or equivalent, during their working hours and should wear N95 masks, or equivalent along with other personal protective equipment (PPE) before entering a room or areas with patients suspected or confirmed with COVID-19;
- All other workers, visitors, caregivers, outpatients, and service providers should wear a medical mask within the healthcare facilities;
- All patients should be screened for SARS-CoV-2 prior to hospitalization, regardless of the condition causing the hospitalization. This measure aims to prevent intra-hospital outbreaks of COVID-19;
- Referral hospitals for care of COVID-19 should be prioritized for severe acute respiratory infection (SARI) cases;
- Strengthen the first level of care and provide diagnostic testing to primary healthcare services in order to guide clinical management when COVID-19 is suspected;
- When possible, manage all patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 within an outpatient continuum of care process;
- All services must perform daily monitoring of staff and hospitalized patients for rapid detection of clinical manifestations of COVID-19;
- Hospitals providing care for other health conditions should have cohort wards for patients without SARI symptoms who test positive for COVID-19 in the screening process. If the patient's clinical condition allows hospital discharge, it should not be delayed due to a positive result for COVID-19; and
- Take appropriate measures to increase staffing, such as rapid mobilization of health profession students to support in some activities during the high influx of patients.

PAHO/WHO will continue to update recommendations to support all Member States on management and protection measures for COVID-19. 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.

Surveillance, rapid response teams, and case investigation 	Clinical management 
WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/30zjmCj PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/36DJi3B	WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3li6wQB PAHO/WHO resources available at: https://bit.ly/3sadTxQ

<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

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2. WHO. COVID-19 Weekly Epidemiological Update. Published on 18 January 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3a8I7be>
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5. WHO. Statement on the tenth meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Published on 19 January 2022. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tKS9f6>