
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—29 JUNE 2022

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Good morning from Panama City, and thank you for joining us for today's press briefing.

This week we saw over 1.3 million new cases of COVID-19 and 4,158 deaths in the Americas. This represents a 13.9% increase in cases from one week ago.

COVID-19 cases increased in all four subregions of the Americas and deaths increased in two: In South America, by 32.8%, and in the Caribbean, where deaths rose some 13.3%.

In North America, cases have increased by 7.7% as compared to the previous week. Canada is reporting less cases, while the United States of America and Mexico are trending in the opposite direction.

In South America, there has been a significant increase in COVID-19 incidence, with almost half a million new COVID-19 cases reported during the last week – a 24.6% increase as compared to the previous week. The largest relative increase was observed in Bolivia followed by Peru.

In the Caribbean, weekly cases have been plateauing for the past two consecutive weeks, with a 3.2% increase observed during the last week.

These numbers serve as a stark reminder that too many people are still vulnerable. Indeed, there is work to be done to reach all that need a vaccine. Looking at Central America: Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama have gone beyond the 70% goal and El Salvador is approaching it.

In the Americas, we still have eleven countries that have not reached the first goal of vaccinating 40 percent of their people against COVID-19. We need to pick up the pace of vaccination to shield populations from the worst consequences of this virus.

In the context of evolving patterns of transmission, countries should not lower their guard.

The pandemic has surprised us time and time again, and many of its effects will linger for years to come.

Today, I would like to focus on one issue we must face and prepare our health systems to address for the long term: post COVID-19 condition.

Many patients, whether they experienced mild, severe, or critical COVID-19, continue to experience COVID-like symptoms for 3 months or more after their initial infection.

These are the people with post-COVID condition, also referred to as long COVID.

Some studies have estimated that 10-20% of people who had COVID may develop post COVID conditions.

Considering the millions of confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide, hundreds of thousands of people may well be affected. This is a particularly important problem for the Americas where we have reported over 161 million COVID-19 cases over the past two years.

It is difficult to be precise about how many people are affected, since cases of post-COVID condition are not always officially reported.

But we know that people who had underlying health conditions, people who did not get vaccinated against COVID-19, people with other risk factors such as asthma, and those who smoke or vape are particularly at risk for this condition.

We also know that people that had COVID once and recovered may still develop post-COVID condition if they are infected again.

Post-COVID condition can be extremely debilitating.

The most common symptom is severe and persistent fatigue. People may also experience shortness of breath, loss of taste and smell, and other respiratory, cognitive, and sensory symptoms.

All of this can impact a person's mental health and influence important aspects of their personal and professional lives, including the ability to relate with the environment and the people around them.

Just imagine how disruptive this can be for a mother who cannot smell her baby, an athletic person who is now tired all of the time, or a professional who cannot concentrate on the tasks that they were trained to do. Other people may have more severe symptoms requiring specialized management.

Even as most of these patients would like COVID to stay in their past, it is still impacting their lives today, and may continue to do so for months or even years to come.

These patients need professional support, and our health systems need to acknowledge this long-lasting effect of the pandemic and certainly to help address it.

WHO has identified three "Rs" to guide our actions.

The first "R" is recognition. We must actively identify people who are suffering from post-COVID condition, so they can get the care and support they need.

The impact of post-COVID condition is broad, but there is still stigma around it, and not enough healthcare workers are trained to recognize the condition. And even fewer have the expertise to help someone manage their symptoms.

This is a real condition, and it must be dealt with applying robust policies and guidance. It is also crucial that we recognize the impact that Post COVID condition has on people's lives and work alongside those affected to ensure that their voices are heard, and that they play an active role to guide national and regional responses.

The second "R" is rehabilitation. We must ensure our health workforce can support the sizeable population who will experience post-COVID symptoms.

This includes supporting the training and development of physical therapists, occupational and speech therapists, mental health professionals, nurses and doctors who can work together to address post-COVID condition in a holistic manner.

Because the symptoms are so varied, managing post-COVID condition requires a multi-disciplinary approach.

PAHO has established a working group to develop patient care guidance and rehabilitation guides to help advance health workers' knowledge of these conditions. We plan to launch these soon, to overlap with new rehabilitation clinical guidance that WHO is finalizing.

And the last "R" is research. We still do not know enough about post-COVID condition.

We are also tracking more than 90,000 cases of COVID-19 in the Americas, including post-COVID conditions, in the Global Clinical Platform for COVID-19, which will help us better understand and treat this condition.

But we need scientists and research institutions to commit to closely following the people suffering from this, so we can learn more about this condition.

And we desperately need clinicians, pharmaceutical and medical technology developers alike to find novel approaches to identify the underlying causes of post-Covid condition and how to treat it.

But by far the best way to avoid post-COVID condition is by not getting COVID.

We have the tools to slow the spread of the virus, such as masking and social distancing, especially when transmission is high.

Vaccines have a vital role to play in preventing the spread of COVID, the emergence of variants and all the consequences of the pandemic which we hope will stay in the past. Also, studies show that those who contract COVID-19 after vaccination have milder symptoms and are less likely to develop post-Covid condition.

But alas 224 million people have not yet received a single shot of vaccine in our region.

Let us embrace the means we have today to prevent the worst consequences of COVID and help us turn the page on this pandemic.