
THIS YEAR'S TOP 10

health stories in

THE AMERICAS



Pan American
Health
Organization



World Health
Organization

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE Americas

ABOUT THE PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), founded in 1902, is the world's oldest international public health agency. It provides technical cooperation and mobilizes partnerships to improve health and quality of life in the countries of the Americas.

PAHO is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American System and serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO). Together with WHO, PAHO is a member of the United Nations system.

Vision

The Pan American Sanitary Bureau will be the major catalyst for ensuring that all the peoples of the Americas enjoy optimal health and contribute to the well being of their families and communities.

Mission

To lead strategic collaborative efforts among Member States and other partners to promote equity in health, to combat disease, and to improve the quality of, and lengthen, the lives of the peoples of the Americas.



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION

FOR PAHO/WHO AND ITS MEMBER COUNTRIES,

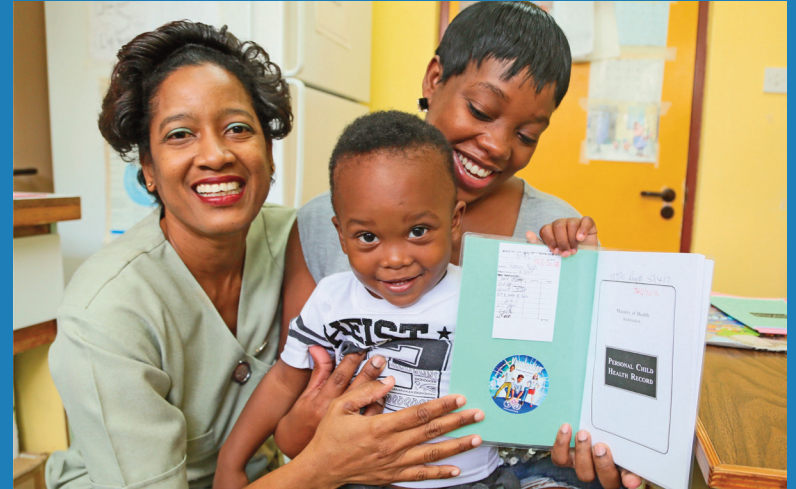
2015 saw both progress and challenges in health

1 BYE-BYE, RUBELLA!

In April 2015, the Americas became the world's first region to be declared free of endemic transmission of rubella, a contagious viral disease that can cause serious birth defects and even fetal death if contracted by women during pregnancy. The declaration made rubella and congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) the third and fourth diseases—after smallpox and polio—to be eliminated first in the Americas region.

Also in April, more than 60 million people in 45 countries and territories of the Americas were vaccinated against rubella, measles, polio, pneumonia and other diseases as part of the 13th annual Vaccination Week in the Americas, PAHO/WHO's flagship initiative. The campaign slogan for 2015 was "Boost your Power. Get Vaccinated."

In June and July, the Americas Cup soccer tournament brought visitors from around the world to Chile. In the lead-up to the match, PAHO/WHO urged travelers to get vaccinated against measles and rubella to prevent cases of both diseases from being imported into the region. Meanwhile, the region is getting closer to eliminating measles.



[Vaccination Week in the Americas 2015 \(press release\)](#)

[Vaccination Week in the Americas 2015 website](#)

[Rubella elimination](#)

[Ten key actions by PAHO member countries that led to elimination of rubella](#)

2 CUBA ELIMINATES MOTHER-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION OF HIV, SYPHILIS

In June 2015, Cuba became the world's first country to receive validation from the World Health Organization (WHO) that it had eliminated mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.

As a result of elimination measures, in Cuba during 2013 only two babies were born with HIV and only three with congenital syphilis, reflecting transmission rates below the threshold for elimination.

A PAHO/WHO-UNICEF progress report released in 2015 showed that 16 countries in the Americas were reporting data consistent with having eliminated mother-to-child transmission of these two diseases. Regionwide, new HIV infections in babies had declined by half since 2010, but even so, some 2,500 children in the region contracted HIV in 2014.



[Press release on WHO validation for Cuba](#)

[“Born free of HIV” \(article\)](#)

[“Born free of HIV” \(video\)](#)

[PAHO/WHO progress report](#)

3 PROGRESS TOWARD UNIVERSAL COVERAGE

Some 46 million additional people in the Americas have obtained health coverage in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2000, according to a new report by the World Bank and PAHO/WHO based on data from 10 countries. Still, some 30% of the region's population lacks access to health care for economic reasons, and 21% do not seek health services due to geographical barriers.

The report calls for greater efforts to reduce persisting health inequities both between and within the region's countries and urges attention to changing health needs, especially the rise of noncommunicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. The report also urges new, more effective and more equitable ways to increase public financing for health systems and calls for reforms to increase health system efficiency by prioritizing primary health care.

PAHO/WHO member countries from throughout the Americas pledged in 2014 to work toward universal health through a regional strategy aimed at ensuring that all people in the Americas have access to the health services they need, when they need them, and without fear of financial difficulties.



More about PAHO/WHO-World Bank report

Health officials from the Americas chart a path toward universal health coverage

4 ZIKA, NEWEST MOSQUITO-BORNE THREAT IN THE AMERICAS

Zika virus in 2015 became the latest mosquito-borne threat to arrive in the Americas. Like dengue and chikungunya, Zika is transmitted by *Aedes* mosquitoes, which are present throughout the region except in continental Chile and Canada. Unlike dengue, which has been present for many years in the region, chikungunya was first detected in 2013 and has since infected more than 1.8 million people. Zika appeared first in May 2015 and by year-end had been reported in 11 countries of the region.

Countries have been taking steps to prepare for Zika by strengthening their capacity to detect the virus and to control the mosquito vector that carries it.

On 1 December 2015, PAHO/WHO issued an alert warning of congenital anomalies, Guillain-Barre syndrome, and other autoimmune illnesses that have been reported in areas where Zika virus is circulating. The alert recommends that countries establish and maintain the ability to detect and confirm Zika cases, prepare their health services for a surge in demand for care, strengthen prenatal care, and continue their efforts to reduce the presence of *Aedes* mosquitoes.



Countries in the Americas prepare for Zika, chikungunya and dengue (in Spanish)

Learn about dengue

Learn about chikungunya

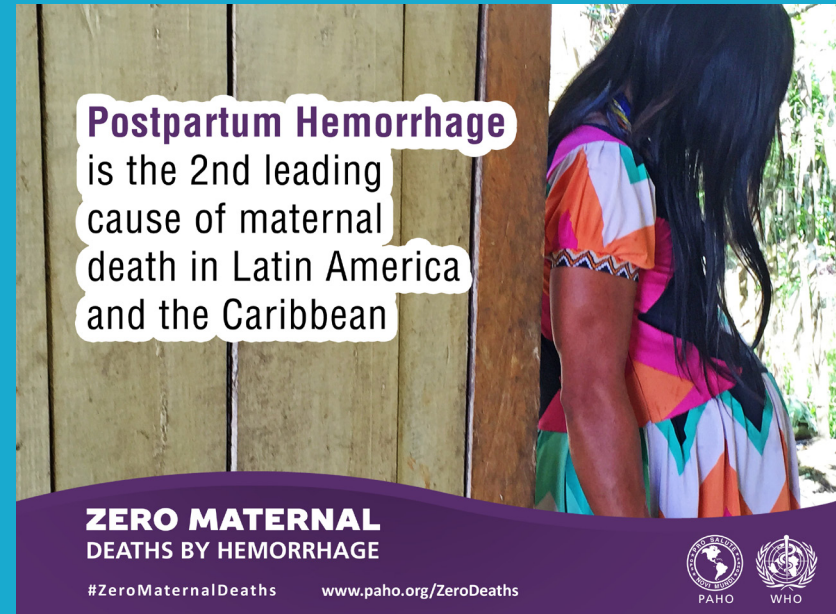
Learn about zika

5 ZERO DEATHS FROM MATERNAL HEMORRHAGE

One in five maternal deaths in the Americas is caused by obstetric hemorrhage during or immediately following childbirth.

To prevent these deaths, PAHO/WHO in 2015 launched the “Zero maternal deaths from hemorrhage” initiative. It promotes woman-centered prenatal care and delivery as well as improved quality of care through training in the management of obstetric emergencies. The initiative also promotes safe and sufficient blood supplies for transfusions and access to transportation for patients with complications.

Mexican pop singer Lila Downs joined with PAHO/WHO in November 2015 as the initiative’s official spokeswoman.



Zero maternal deaths from hemorrhage

Lila Downs and PAHO launch campaign to prevent postpartum hemorrhage deaths in the Americas

6 ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS INCREASE ALONG WITH OBESITY

Sales of industrially processed foods—including fast food and sugar-sweetened beverages—have been rising steadily in Latin America and are contributing to rising rates of obesity, according to a PAHO/WHO report launched this year.

The report notes that per capita sales of these products increased in Latin America between 2000 and 2013 while decreasing in North America. The increase in consumption correlates strongly with increases in body mass index (BMI) in Latin America.

To reverse the trend, PAHO/WHO recommends policies to make healthier choices easier for people to make. These include taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and restrictions on marketing of ultra-processed foods to children.



Ultraprocessed foods drive obesity epidemic in Latin America

Download the PAHO/WHO report

7 HARMFUL USE OF ALCOHOL IS ON THE RISE

The number of men who engage in heavy episodic drinking—the most harmful drinking pattern—nearly doubled in the Americas over a five-year period, while the rate among women nearly tripled in the same period.

The increases were reported in PAHO/WHO's first Regional Status Report on Alcohol and Health in the Americas, released in July 2015. The report urges measures to reduce the availability of alcohol, restrict its marketing and promotion, and raise prices on alcohol through taxes.



*Harmful alcohol use is increasing in the Americas
(press release)*

Download the report

8 CAMPAIGN FOR SAFE FOOD, FROM FARM TO PLATE

Food contaminated by bacteria, viruses, parasites or toxic chemicals produce more than 200 diseases, from diarrhea to cancer. In the Americas, 77 million people suffer an episode of foodborne illness each year, and nearly half those affected are children under 5.

On World Health Day 2015 (April 7), PAHO/WHO highlighted the health threat of contaminated food and the need to keep food safe throughout the food chain.



Unsafe foods cause over 200 illnesses (press release)

World Health Day 2015 (PAHO)

Peruvian chef Gastón Acurio joins PAHO food safety campaign



Video: “From farm to plate. Keep it safe.”

Gastón Acurio PSA (in Spanish)

9 SAFE, GREEN AND 'SMART' HOSPITALS

The region of the Americas is the second-most affected by disasters after Asia. Nearly a quarter of the world's disasters between 2004 and 2014 took place in the Americas. Whenever a hurricane, earthquake or flood occurs, the health sector is often affected. Moreover, in Latin America and the Caribbean, nearly 7 in 10 hospitals are located in disaster-prone areas.

PAHO/WHO's Smart Hospitals initiative helps countries ensure that hospitals can continue to function during emergencies while also trying to reduce their environmental impact. In June 2015, PAHO/WHO launched a second three-year phase of the initiative in a dozen hospitals in Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Among the major disasters that hit the region during 2015 were heavy rains and flooding in Chile and Tropical Storm Erika in Dominica. PAHO/WHO responded immediately with technical cooperation to minimize the disasters' impact on people's health and on health systems. Also during 2015, PAHO/WHO convened a meeting of foreign medical teams in Panama to strengthen the future international response to outbreaks and emergencies in the region.



PAHO/WHO promotes “smart” hospitals in the Caribbean (press release)

Smart Hospitals video

10 FROM THE MDGs TO THE SDGs

This year marked the end-point for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but also the beginning the new global development agenda known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs were officially adopted in September at the United Nations in New York. One of the new goals—SDG 3—is dedicated to health, but many other goals have a direct impact on health as well.

PAHO/WHO is working to strengthen the health sector in its member countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to advance toward the achievement of SDG 3 by 2030 and is urging the incorporation of health concerns into all public policies, to address the social determinants of health.

PAHO/WHO launched a new publication that provides guidance for countries as they work to achieve the targets for SDG 3.



*Preparing countries to achieve the SDGs
(press release)*

Download the publication (in Spanish)

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