
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—12 JAN 2022

12 JANUARY 2022

Good morning, let me wish each of you a Happy New Year and thank you for joining our first press briefing of 2022.

Since the start of this pandemic, nearly 300 million people around the world have been infected with COVID-19.

And the virus has quickly picked up pace over the holiday season, reaching levels of transmission never seen before during this pandemic.

Over the past week, COVID infections have nearly doubled in the Region of the Americas, rising from 3.4 million on January 1st to 6.1 million on January 8th. To compare with last year, during the week ending January 8, 2021, the Americas had reported a total of 2.4 million cases while this year by the same date there were 6 million reported cases, representing a 250% increase year to year.

Infections are accelerating across every corner of the Americas, and once again, our health systems are being challenged as emergency room visits and hospitalizations are rising. Nonetheless, thanks to the protective power of vaccines, COVID deaths are not rising with the current wave of infections.

The US is reporting the bulk of new cases, where its eastern and midwestern states are experiencing a rapid surge. In Canada, cases are also picking up speed in its eastern provinces.

In the Caribbean, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are reporting the highest numbers of new infections, although other islands like Jamaica, Aruba, Curaçao, and Martinique are also seeing significant jumps in COVID cases.

Meanwhile, Belize and Panama are reporting the highest incidence of COVID in Central America.

Further south, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil are experiencing significant increases in new cases. COVID hospitalizations are also up throughout Brazil, particularly in densely populated states around the central and eastern parts of the country. In Argentina and Paraguay, COVID infections have increased by nearly 300% over the last week.

Today of course, all eyes are on Omicron, which has reached nearly every country in the world. 42 countries and territories in all subregions of the Americas, North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, have already detected the Omicron variant. Some countries are already experiencing widespread community transmission as Omicron spreads more quickly than other detected variants, and more likely via airborne transmission in closed spaces.

And while Delta is still causing new infections in the Americas, based on current trends, Omicron is on track to become the dominant strain in our region.

It also has led to a rise in re-infections, even among those who are fully vaccinated. This new wave of infections won't be "mild" for our health systems, as the Omicron variant is already challenging our health workforce and limiting care for other diseases. In smaller island states, some hospitals were already strained by cases of the Delta variant, and now more hospitals face the prospect of being overwhelmed with cases.

One of the characteristics that sets Omicron apart seems to be less severe symptoms. Even so, Omicron infections can be lethal, especially for the immunocompromised and the unvaccinated. So, the time to act is now, using the many tools we now have at hand.

Prioritizing symptomatic individuals for testing and making rational use of these resources is critical to catch infections quickly and early, maintaining and reinforcing the public health measures is paramount to slow transmission.

The PCR and rapid antigen tests recommended by PAHO remain effective at detecting the Omicron variant, so countries should continue to use existing protocols, with rational use of tests.

PAHO's Strategic Fund makes COVID tests available at low prices, so countries should take advantage of this resource.

Vaccines are especially important as Omicron takes hold.

Countries in the Americas have been working diligently to secure the vaccines they need to protect their populations. Thanks to their efforts, nearly 60% of people in Latin America in the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated with two doses.

And many countries in our region—like Chile, Cuba, and Argentina—have some of the highest vaccination coverage rates in the world.

Vaccines are helping to save lives, and expanding equitable coverage everywhere remains our priority. WHO's expert group SAGE has also called for vaccination strategies "optimized for prevention of severe disease, including the targeted use of booster vaccination." This applies to people at high risk of complications and health care workers who are more exposed to the virus.

We must continue to protect our health workers.

Our region's ability to respond and overcome this pandemic depends on men and women who staff our primary health care centers, clinics, and hospitals. As health professionals everywhere handle the influx of new cases requiring immediate care, we must make sure that they are protected from the worst consequences of this virus.

Wherever enough vaccines are available, health workers should be prioritized for an additional COVID vaccine dose. Additional doses are safe and effective and will help reinforce health workers' ability to withstand exposure to the virus, especially now that infections are rising. 39 countries and territories in the Americas have been rolling out additional doses to ensure their populations, including health workers, remain protected.

But protecting our health workers cannot stop there. We urge countries to ensure they have the right protective equipment so our health workers can do their jobs safely.

With a virus as transmissible as this one, effective and well-fitted masks help us all stay safe, so we urge countries to provide their health workers with the PAHO/WHO recommended protective equipment including masks with the highest filtration capacity.

While COVID continues to spread in our region, we remind everyone that our goal has always been to protect each other from the most serious symptoms so we can save lives and prevent deaths from COVID infections.

Saving lives remains our highest priority.

Once again, we must slow down new infections to avoid overwhelming our health systems.

Governments must act, guided by evidence, to limit new infections.

And we all have a personal responsibility to keep each other safe by following proven public health measures like mask wearing, social distancing and avoiding large gatherings, by getting vaccinated when it's our turn, and by getting tested if we suspect that we are sick.

Our collective actions against this virus have the power to change its course.

Whether we are fighting for vaccine equity, supporting our health workers, or doing our part to reduce the risk of transmission, solidarity will pave our way out of the pandemic.