



PAHO Director's remarks on COVID-19 pandemic - 11 March 2020

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Today, the WHO Director General announced COVID-19 as a pandemic.

“Pandemic” refers to the geographic distribution of a disease, and not to its severity. The designation acknowledges that there are now outbreaks of COVID-19 in multiple countries and multiple Regions of the world.

As of today, more than 118, 000 cases have been confirmed in 114 countries, and more than 4,000 people have lost their lives worldwide. In the Americas, 14 countries and 4 French overseas territories have reported 836 confirmed cases and 27 deaths.

Considering the announcement – PAHO’s recommendations to countries of the Americas are now even more relevant.

As I have said before, it is likely that our Region will face a combination of three different scenarios at once:

- There will be countries that experience imported cases that can be contained.
- There will be others that see outbreaks in closed environments such as nursing homes, or prisons.
- And there will be other countries that will see widespread community transmission.

It is vital that all countries prepare tailored responses to each and every one of these possibilities, using all available resources.

This means that all countries that have not yet activated their pandemic plans should do so now.

And while all actions are important, countries should focus on five key areas:

- Ensuring early detection
- Saving lives
- Reducing disease transmission
- Working with all other sectors to maintain basic services
- Communicating with the public at every stage

Every person in every community must play their part - to protect themselves, their families and everyone else – by:

- Washing their hands frequently with soap and water.
- Avoiding close contact with those who are sick
- When coughing or sneezing -- always use a tissue and throw it away immediately -- or cough or sneeze into the inside of the arm.
- And every person should always follow the advice of their country's public health officials.

Public health recommendations are meant to protect you and your loved ones. These measures will help reduce the spread of the disease so that health services will not become overwhelmed and can provide the care that people need.

We are better prepared now than we were 10 years ago, as we have learned lessons from previous pandemics and epidemics.

We have been through difficult times before and will, once again, overcome this challenging situation.

The Region of the Americas is known for its solidarity and for working together as a team. Now more than ever, we must join together for our own health and the health of our families and communities.