
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—21 OCTOBER 2020

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Good morning and thank you for joining today's press briefing.

As of October 20th, there have been over 40 million cases and over 1.1 million deaths worldwide due to COVID-19, including 18.9 million cases in the Region of the Americas and over 610,000 deaths.

Across our Region, around 100,000 people continue to test positive for COVID-19 every day. However, during the last week, following a dramatic resurgence, the European region has reported more cases compared to the Americas.

As we analyze how COVID continues to spread across the Americas, a few important trends are worth highlighting:

The U.S. continues to see a steady rise in cases in all but two states and cases numbers are rising rapidly in the Midwest and the Rocky Mountains.

Canada is experiencing a significant second wave of the virus. During the last two weeks the north east of Canada – including the province of New Brunswick, has reported high rates of new cases.

COVID-19 cases are plateauing across much of Central America with Costa-Rica presenting the highest incidence rate during the last week, and Belize reporting a steady increase.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, most new cases are related to non-essential international travel. Last week, Grenada reported its first new COVID-19 case in three months, coinciding with a reopening of its borders.

These resurgences underscore that fighting this pandemic is not a one-time effort. It requires a sustained response, even in places where transmission is down, we must keep it up.

The pandemic is not behind us and the threat of new cases remains active everywhere, and that's why countries must remain in control of the virus – while we await the arrival of a safe and effective vaccine.

As we've said before, today we have a pipeline of more than 190 vaccine candidates under study, with 11 in phase III clinical trials, several of them including volunteers in our region.

While the world urgently awaits a breakthrough, it is important to highlight that PAHO will only support the distribution of a vaccine that has proven to be safe and effective in clinical trials reviewed by National Regulatory Authorities and recommended by the World Health Organization.

Vaccines are designed and manufactured with safety in mind. This process is supervised by regulators and followed closely by the scientific community.

Once a vaccine proves safe and effective in a clinical trial, regulatory agencies thoroughly evaluate the data prior to granting any approvals. The WHO will also oversee an independent review process before granting its own recommendation.

While the global community is concerned with the nature of this pandemic, the regulatory approval process will be just as thorough as the process taken for any other vaccine.

Even after a vaccine is approved, countries around the world will monitor its safety and effectiveness over time – as they do with every other vaccine on the market today.

So, it's important to emphasize that while we're working to develop a vaccine faster than ever before, the process to guarantee its safety and efficacy is unchanged.

What *has* changed during the effort to develop a safe and efficacious vaccine against COVID-19, is the unprecedented attention on the vaccine development process.

This has resulted in an over-abundance of information from an endless number of sources, some less reliable than others and not based on science, which has led to confusion and misinformation around vaccine safety.

I cannot state this strongly enough: misinformation is a grave threat to the health of our region.

Insidious rumors and conspiracy theories can disrupt vaccination efforts and imperil our COVID-19 response, costing lives.

How we communicate about COVID-19 vaccines will make or break our ability to control the pandemic.

It is vital that the public are provided with clear, concise and science-based information about a future COVID-19 vaccine and PAHO is working closely with countries in our region to help ensure this. However, we are also counting on you- the media - and others, like national regulatory authorities, the private sector and the scientific community to help us ensure accurate information and effectively tackle misinformation.

Another important factor to establish trust in COVID-19 vaccines is to ensure they are accessible to every country.

And that's why PAHO has been engaged in the COVAX Facility so countries across our region have equitable access to a vaccine as soon as it becomes available.

COVAX will be the best viable option that countries will have to access COVID-19 vaccines in the short term. That's why over 182 countries and economies around the world have joined this initiative.

We're also happy to report that virtually every country in Latin America and the Caribbean has joined or is in the process of joining the facility.

PAHO has been supporting countries to navigate what can be very often complicated legal and budgetary steps needed to secure their participation in this innovative global partnership.

For example, we are actively collaborating with financial institutions, like the Inter-American Development Bank, to support countries in our region access the funding needed to purchase vaccines through the COVAX Facility when they are available.

PAHO is also collaborating with the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and the European Union to provide financial support for the down payment required by the COVAX Facility for Caribbean countries to join – 11 countries will be covered by this agreement. This will help to ensure that the Caribbean people, especially the most vulnerable, can benefit from a safe, effective COVID-19 vaccine.

And finally, PAHO's Revolving Fund, with more than 40 years of experience providing affordable and quality vaccines to countries in Latin American and the Caribbean, will be, along with UNICEF, the purchase mechanism for the COVAX facility.

Our region is hard at work preparing for a vaccine, but we must also keep a strong and steady course to continue fighting the virus without a vaccine.

Treatment options unfortunately remain limited. This means that we must continue to rely on the best strategies available to us: effective surveillance and sound public health measures.

Testing, treating and isolating cases, as well as tracing contacts are all part of a good surveillance strategy and really too few countries are doing this well in our region.

I urge all Member States to prioritize a transparent and proactive communications approach for COVID-19.

The people of our region crave clear guidance. Communicating effectively and consistently about what they can do to protect themselves and to avoid infection remains vital.

It's as important now as it was in April. And it will be even more important once we have a vaccine. Together we can overcome COVID-19.