
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—18 NOVEMBER 2020

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

Over the last week, the Region of the Americas reported nearly 1.5 million cases and 19,000 deaths due to COVID-19.

Since the start of the pandemic, more than 23 million people have been infected with COVID in our region and more than 680,000 have died as a result of the virus.

Today, North America remains a significant driver of new infections.

The U.S. is continuing to see an acceleration of cases, reporting more than one million new infections in the last week alone. These surges have also led to a record number of hospitalizations, which is particularly concerning since we know that when our health facilities are overwhelmed, it limits our ability to treat those who are severely ill.

Mexico has now surpassed one million COVID-19 infections and the resurgence of COVID-19 activity continues in Canada.

Further south, Belize is reporting spikes in infections, and the COVID response in Central America is also being threatened by the tail-end of hurricane season, with hurricane Iota now forecasted to strike the region, just a week after hurricane Eta led to flooding, storm surges and damaging winds in several countries.

During the last two weeks, cases have decreased in most Andean countries and Argentina continues to observe a sharp decrease that began 3 weeks ago.

However, as part of the mosaic of trends, over the past weeks, Uruguay - which is the only mainland country to report cluster transmission - has experienced spikes in some areas on its border with Brazil. And Brazil is experiencing a new increase in cases and deaths in some states.

It is clear that as this virus continues to actively spread in our region, countries must remain vigilant. Every country must continue to monitor their epidemic situation, and should new infections arise, they must adapt their responses quickly to prevent further outbreaks.

But while the Region continues to face challenges in responding to the virus, the past week has brought some good news regarding the development of potential COVID-19 vaccines. This is encouraging, and we're eager to review the accompanying data. However, we must be clear: only a vaccine that has proven safe and effective will be approved by regulators, endorsed by the WHO and, ultimately, made available through COVAX.

So there is still much to be done.

Today, I want to highlight some of the steps that must be taken by countries while we await a vaccine:

We know that delivering a vaccine will be challenging and costly. In fact, the latest projections from the COVAX Facility for Latin America and the Caribbean estimate that vaccinating 20% of the population will cost more than \$2 billion dollars.

And while these figures are high, vaccines are both a smart and necessary investment.

That is why PAHO has been working with Member States to ensure that every country that is interested will have access to the COVAX Facility. We have also partnered with the Inter-American Development Bank, the European Union and other financial institutions and donors to secure the funding needed for lower income countries in our region to join.

Self-financing countries in the Americas participating in the COVAX Facility will have the option to purchase the vaccines through PAHO's Revolving Fund. This will accelerate their access because they have been using this mechanism for many years and have already adapted their laws and regulations accordingly.

As of today, 28 self-financing countries have signed agreements with the COVAX Facility, and an additional 10 countries are eligible for support under the COVAX Advance Market Commitment

Because time is of the essence, many vaccine manufacturers have begun producing COVID-19 vaccines even before they receive regulatory approval. However, it is important to keep in mind that they can only be used once clinical trials are complete, data on the safety and efficacy has been published, and licensing received from regulatory authorities.

Last week, PAHO and UNICEF kicked off the purchasing process for COVID-19 vaccines by inviting vaccine manufacturers around the world to apply to become a supplier for the 186 countries that have joined the COVAX facility. By the end of 2021 the facility aims to deploy at least 2 billion doses of quality COVID-19 vaccines quickly and equitably.

This is a remarkable figure. But we also know that it won't be sufficient to vaccinate everyone, at least not at first.

Our main goal as we plan the first phase of vaccination is to save lives. And, that is why it's important to protect the most vulnerable first – The priority will be to protect health care workers and other front-line workers, as well as those at a high risk of developing severe disease

PAHO has worked closely with governments to review their immunization programs, share regulatory information and strengthen their cold chain capacity to ensure a smooth and quick rollout. Indeed, some of the vaccines being developed may require new ways to store, transport and distribute vaccines within the region, and we will need to build on existing infrastructure to meet this challenge.

Even with these efforts, we know that trust is the most important ingredient in a vaccination campaign.

And as COVID-19 vaccines advance through the research process, we must remain vigilant against rumors and conspiracy theories spreading across our region that have the potential to disrupt vaccination efforts and impede our COVID response.

We call on countries across our region to help build the trust needed for these upcoming vaccines, by providing transparent, accurate information about the vaccine development process, as well as its safety and efficacy. Above all, we must all stand up against misinformation as these rumors have an impact on people's perceptions and attitudes toward a COVID vaccine. This will not only waste valuable time and resources, but it will also cost lives.

Although a COVID-19 vaccine is still some months away, and preparation for this is key, we must not forget to continue to implement those measures that we know will reduce the spread of the virus, control transmission and save lives: wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, avoiding unnecessary gatherings and following the recommendations of local and national health authorities.

Furthermore, we must make the most of the life-saving vaccines that are already available, to prevent other outbreaks of severe diseases such as polio, measles and others.

Vaccination rates continue to fall in our region and, like other essential health services, have been further impacted by COVID disruptions – with a decrease in demand for vaccination services: This year, 9 countries in the Region of the Americas reported a total of 8479 cases of measles, including 8 deaths, and 5 countries reported 56 cases of diphtheria, including 16 deaths. Both of these diseases are fully preventable with vaccines.

PAHO and WHO are also launching a global campaign this week to fight cervical cancer. HPV vaccines are safe and effective and can help us eliminate cervical cancer within a generation. This is an opportunity we can't waste.

Vaccines should always be seen as a global public good. For decades, PAHO has been working to make vaccines affordable and available to all who need them. As we race towards a COVID-19 vaccine, we should not compromise this vision.