
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19 DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—21 APRIL 2021

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

In the last week, our region reported more than 1.5 million new COVID cases and nearly 40,000 COVID-related deaths.

Over the weekend, the world reached a tragic milestone: more than three million people have lost their lives to COVID. And nearly half of these deaths happened right here, in the Americas.

Behind every death is a life cut short and the unimaginable suffering of families and loved ones.

Their passing is a reminder that we must do more to protect each other because this virus continues to be a threat in every corner and community across our region.

Cases in Canada are still growing – particularly among young people in their 20s and 30s – and in the U.S., infections are on the rise after weeks of declines.

Nearly every country in Central America is reporting a rise in infections.

Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic continue to drive most infections in the Caribbean. And many smaller island nations like Aruba, Bermuda, and Curacao are reporting a rise in COVID-related deaths.

The recent volcanic eruptions in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines have led to evacuations with thousands of people currently living in shelters. More than 137 COVID cases have been reported in shelters thus far, and we expect more new infections in the coming weeks.

In South America, cases are accelerating in Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Uruguay. Argentina has also seen a rapid growth of new infections and has assumed the third highest case count in our region.

The good news is that after strengthening public health measures, Chile has seen cases plateau, and after a difficult few months, Brazil is reporting a drop in cases – including in the Amazon region. But cases remain alarmingly high across Brazil, and certain municipalities have been quick to ease restrictions, so it's likely that these trends will reverse.

For more than a year, we have been inundated with news reports and information about this virus.

Most of us have had a hard time keeping up, but science is a collaborative, evolving process, and researchers and doctors rely on shared information to learn from each other and build our collective knowledge to prevent and treat this virus.

Transparency is paramount. That's why PAHO continues to host these press briefings to share the latest trusted information and answer your questions.

But not all sources are worthy of trust, and insidious rumors and conspiracy theories continue to spread, inspiring fear and costing lives.

Today, misinformation is one of the most serious threats to our public health.

Because unreliable information spreads quickly, PAHO is collaborating with tech companies like Twitter, Google, and Facebook to address fake news and ensure the public can easily find accurate information.

But we all have a role to play in stopping these rumors from spreading online or in conversations. When we read or hear something that seems outlandish or improbable, it probably is.

Before sharing something, we owe it to each other to check the source and confirm that the information is true. This is common courtesy. And if you have a doubt, please don't spread it.

Misinformation is most damaging when it fuels vaccine hesitancy.

For more than a hundred years, vaccines have saved millions of lives from infectious diseases and spared generations from diseases like smallpox, polio, and measles.

Today, vaccines are helping turn the tide of this pandemic.

Any vaccine or medicine can present side events at a certain level. When national regulators license a vaccine or a medicine, or when WHO grants a prequalification or an Emergency Use Listing (EUL) authorization, they weigh the benefits versus the risks. The vaccines delivered through COVAX have been thoroughly assessed by the WHO experts. The benefits of these vaccines in preventing infections, hospitalizations, and deaths outweigh the risks of side events.

The reports of very rare unexpected side effects, and decisions by some regulatory bodies to conduct further analyses, demonstrate one thing: that our surveillance systems are working.

We rely on surveillance systems to see how medicines and vaccines affect populations so we can understand even extremely rare adverse events and adapt our strategies when needed.

But we need to highlight that every person in a vulnerable group that is hesitant to get the vaccine can become part of the sad statistics, one of the thousands of deaths that occur daily

due to COVID-19. Vaccines are saving lives now and will contribute to control transmission in the near future when we achieve high immunization coverage.

In Israel, COVID-19 vaccines are already helping drive down infections, and initial data from Chile and some cities in Brazil indicate a reduction in hospitalizations among the elderly, thanks in part to COVID vaccines.

COVID vaccines don't provide instant protection. Our bodies take time to build up immunity to the virus

after we're vaccinated, and we won't see their full impact until more of us are protected. Let's remember that with the limited doses available to us at this time, the priority should be to save lives. Stopping transmission of this disease requires additional measures.

That's why PAHO is doing everything we can to get as many vaccines to our region as possible, as quickly as possible.

We have helped deliver more than 4.2 million doses of COVID vaccines to 29 countries in the Americas. Millions of additional vaccines are due in the coming weeks. And we won't stop until every country in our region has the vaccines they need.

Next week is World Immunization week, an effort that started at PAHO 18 years ago with Vaccination Week in the Americas. This is a perfect time to remind us all of the power of vaccines to save lives.

Vaccinations are a collective effort and the success of immunization campaigns depends on all of us.

We need more COVID vaccines for our region. We need countries to quickly administer the doses they have on hand. We need communities to build trust in vaccines. And when it's your turn to get vaccinated, remember: these vaccines can save your life.

While we maintain strict public health measures to avoid infections, getting vaccinated is a powerful action we can, and should take to protect ourselves, our families and our communities from this virus.