

For World Polio Day, PAHO encourages countries to maintain polio vaccination to prevent outbreaks

The Region of the Americas was the first to eliminate polio – a huge achievement in public health – but the virus still circulates in other countries around the world

Washington, DC, 23 October 2020 (PAHO/WHO) – Countries in the Americas must maintain polio vaccination and epidemiological surveillance during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to prevent outbreaks, say experts at the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). The reminder comes on the eve of World Polio Day, observed October 24.

While the Americas was the first region to be declared polio-free more than 25 years ago, that achievement needs can only be protected with continued vaccination and strong surveillance. “Although as a region we have defeated polio once before, if we allow vaccination coverage rates to fall and become too low, we will be at risk for polio circulation in our communities once again,” said PAHO Director Carissa F. Etienne. “That is why it is more important than ever to do our part to protect and sustain polio elimination in our region while we wait for countries in other parts of the world to achieve this goal.”

Regional polio vaccination coverage rates for the Americas have been below the recommended 95% over the past few years. Reported coverage for the third dose of the oral polio vaccine (OPV3) for the Americas between 2016 and 2019 ranged between 85-87%. Coverage in 2020 might to be lower in many countries due to disruptions in primary health care activities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cuauhtemoc Ruiz Matus, head of PAHO’s Immunization Program, said, “Now during the pandemic, we must work extra hard to not lose what we have gained.” He noted that important factors in the success of the Region’s fight against polio included strong political commitment from governments; engaged, committed communities; strategic partnerships and support between international agencies, Rotary International, and governments; and tireless health care workers who made it their goal to reach and protect every child with polio immunization. “Without all of these things, we wouldn’t be where we are today,” said Ruiz.

The COVID-19 pandemic has stressed essential health services, including immunization services and epidemiological surveillance systems designed to catch vaccine-preventable diseases quickly and allow for a rapid response before outbreaks grow, as health care workers around the Region have been focusing on pandemic response.

The Americas as a leader in global polio eradication

The Region of the Americas reported its last case of poliomyelitis caused by wild poliovirus in 1991, and in 1994 was the first region to receive the certification of having eliminated the virus. Lessons learned from the Americas on epidemiological surveillance and initiatives aimed at the sustainability of immunization programs through PAHO's Revolving Fund for Vaccine Procurement have been shared with immunization programs globally, and now five of the six WHO regions – representing more than 90% of the world's population - have been certified as free of wild polio. Only two countries in the world continue to report wild poliovirus transmission: Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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The [Pan American Health Organization \(PAHO\)](#) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.

LINKS:

PAHO Immunization Program: www.paho.org/immunization

PAHO Polio Program: <https://www.paho.org/en/topics/poliomyelitis>

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