

Children and adolescents deeply impacted by COVID-19 pandemic, PAHO Director asserts

PAHO recommends measures to protect children from the pandemic's indirect and direct effects, as more than 1.9 million children and adolescents reported infected with COVID-19 in 2021.



Washington, D.C. September 15, 2021 (PAHO) Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa F. Etienne said today that COVID-19 has severely impacted the mental and physical health of children and adolescents in the Americas. She urged countries to take several specific measures to protect them, including safe reopening of schools.

Dr. Etienne said over 1.5 million cases were reported in the region last year, while more than 1.9 million have already been reported in the first nine months of this year. While children and young people generally experience mild or no symptoms, they can also develop severe illness.

“As more adults receive their COVID-19 vaccines, children – who

are not yet eligible for vaccinations in most countries – are representing a larger percentage of COVID hospitalizations and even deaths,” Dr. Etienne said in a media briefing. “So, let’s be clear: children and young people also face a significant risk of disease from COVID-19.”

But, in addition, an array of secondary impacts are hitting children and adolescents particularly hard, the PAHO Director detailed. “The virus indirectly has consequences and is hindering their growth and development, and jeopardizing their chances at a bright future,” she warned.

Dr. Etienne emphasized the negative impact of not attending school in person. “With each day that children go without in-person schooling, the higher the likelihood that they drop out and never return to school,” she said. “For some of the most vulnerable children – particularly for our girls – this can have lasting consequences.”

“Experts agree that the pandemic has triggered the worst educational crisis we have ever seen in the region,” Dr. Etienne continued. She urged countries to focus on restoring health, education, and social services for school-age populations.

Children and adolescents are also missing annual check-ups and routine vaccinations due to widespread disruptions to health systems. “Half of young people have experienced increased stress or anxiety during the pandemic, yet mental health services and support remain out of reach for many,” she said.

Sexual and reproductive health services have been disrupted in more than half of countries in the region, and lockdowns and economic disruptions have increased the risk of domestic violence that can make home unsafe for children and adolescents.

To reduce negative impacts on young people, countries should do “everything they can to safely reopen schools,” Dr. Etienne advised. Noting that “there is no zero-risk scenario,” she said national and local authorities should decide when to open or close schools, depending on local epidemiological conditions

and capacity to respond. PAHO has developed detailed guidelines for safe reopening, including ensuring proper ventilation and sanitary conditions.

Children and adolescents should practice the proven public health measures: physical distancing, washing hands often, wearing masks in public, and avoiding crowded places. And they should also get tested if they develop symptoms or suspect they're sick.

And countries should develop communications campaigns tailored for children and adolescents to ensure that they understand their risk of infection and ability to transmit COVID-19. "Too many children and young people still don't think they're at risk," Dr. Etienne said.

Turning to her epidemiological update, Dr. Etienne reported that infections have increased by 20 percent in the Americas in the past week even as they are declining or plateauing in many other parts of the world. Cases have risen by a third in North America due to increases in the U.S. and Canada. The U.S. is reporting more than 100,000 new daily infections for the first time since January.

Infections are rising in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Belize, and many hospitals are "completely saturated" with COVID-19 patients, Dr. Etienne said.

Infections generally have slowed in the Caribbean. However, Grenada, Barbados and Bermuda are reporting sharp increases, and Jamaica experienced its highest weekly infections since the beginning of the pandemic. Meanwhile, most South American countries continue to report declines in infections and deaths.

In total, 1.4 million cases and 23,300 COVID-related deaths were reported in the Americas in the past week.

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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.