



As COVID cases continue to rise in the Americas, PAHO Director urges countries to “take stock of the numbers and act”

With the virus “not going away any time soon,” countries must bolster testing and surveillance and ensure that vaccines get to where they are needed the most.



Washington D.C., 18 May 2022 (PAHO) – As cases of COVID-19 rise sharply throughout the region – by 27.2% over the past week – the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director, Carissa F. Etienne, has called on countries to take action to increase surveillance, public health measures and vaccination, and to make sure that health systems are prepared to cope with a potential influx of COVID-19 patients.

“Last week, our region reported more than 918,000 cases,” the Director said in a media briefing today. “COVID-19 hospitalizations increased in 18 countries, and admissions to Intensive Care Units rose in 13 countries and territories.”

Following a period of lower transmission, the PAHO Director highlighted that many countries have abandoned public health measures such as mask-wearing and social distancing.

But with only 14 of the 51 countries and territories in the Americas reaching the World Health Organization (WHO) goal of 70% vaccination coverage, far too many people remain unprotected.

In some countries, vaccination coverage is particularly low among those at risk of severe disease, including the elderly, pregnant women, and people with preexisting conditions, she noted.

“Each country is only as protected as the most vulnerable in their population,” Dr. Etienne said. “It is time to take stock of these numbers and act. COVID-19 is again on the rise in the Americas.”

Despite having built “incredible networks for COVID testing and genomic surveillance” over the past two years, the PAHO Director said that testing rates have steadily declined since January.

“We must keep our eyes on the virus,” she said, calling on countries to maintain and strengthen testing infrastructure and to ensure that in places where self-tests are available, results are reported to health authorities.

Countries must also maintain investments in Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and hospital capacity so that services can be quickly scaled-up to meet a potential surge in new infections, she added.

The PAHO Director called on countries to be ready to reinstate public health measures in areas where cases spike, and to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are protected, particularly now that vaccine supplies are no longer a barrier.

“We have sufficient doses to cover those most at risk, and we have an obligation to do so,” she said.

Turning to the COVID-19 situation in the region, the Director noted that more than half of the new infections were reported in North America, where cases

have been climbing for seven weeks, driven by a surge in the United States.

In Central America, COVID-19 cases have increased by 80%, and cases have also spiked in countries across South America.

In the Caribbean, new infections have been on the rise for five consecutive weeks, with a 9.3% increase in cases and a 49% increase in deaths.

As the world's highest health authorities meet next week for the World Health Assembly in Geneva to determine the global priorities for public health, the PAHO Director said that health emergencies will remain top of the agenda.

"We must take what we learned from past emergencies to shape a future where our health systems and leadership are better prepared to face the next challenge," she said.

"The better prepared our health systems are, the less lives we lose and the stronger and more resilient our societies become."

Links

[Conferencia de prensa de la OPS sobre COVID-19 / PAHO's Press Briefing on COVID-19 - AUDIO ORIGINAL](#)

[PAHO Press Briefing on COVID19 - AUDIO ENGLISH](#)

[Coletiva de Imprensa OPAS - COVID-19 - AUDIO PORTUGUÊS](#)

[Conférence de Presse COVID-19 - AUDIO FRANÇAIS](#)

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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.

