

PAHO Director warned that it may take time before people are vaccinated and said countries should continue public health measures such as social distancing, handwashing and wearing masks in public

Washington D.C., September 23, 2020 (PAHO) – *Countries should not wait for a COVID-19 vaccine to be developed before they start planning and preparing for its arrival, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director, Carissa F Etienne, said today. In the meantime, they must also continue other recommended public health measures to contain the virus.*

“Frontline health workers, first responders and those caring for the elderly should be vaccinated first, followed by vulnerable groups such as adults with pre-existing conditions, especially those over 65 years of age,” Etienne said. “The challenge lies in identifying these groups early and determining how to best reach them.”

In a news briefing today PAHO Director warned that even as a vaccine is rolled out “This virus will continue to spread, and people will continue to get sick. So, we cannot pin all our hope on vaccines alone.”

“We’ll still need diagnostics to identify those who are sick and better treatments to care for those that fall ill. We’ll continue to rely on traditional public health measures like tests, contact tracing and quarantines to minimize the spread of this virus. And we’ll continue to count on people exercising social distancing, washing their hands often and wearing masks in public to protect others from getting sick,” the PAHO Director said.

When vaccines become available, the COVAX Facility, convened by GAVI, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and WHO, “will afford countries in our region the best opportunity to fast-track access to COVID-19 vaccines and reduce the impact of the pandemic on people’s lives and our economies. The COVAX facility offers access to a basket of 15 possible vaccines,” she said.

Etienne said nearly 200 COVID-19 vaccine candidates are being studied. “And we hope that one or more of these will prove to be effective, but there is no guarantee. Early vaccines may only provide partial protection or may not work for everyone. We don’t yet know which vaccine will be found safe and effective and how it will work. But we do know that if we don’t prepare now, we will miss the opportunity to benefit from it quickly. The truth is countries can’t wait to have all of the answers before they start planning and preparing to deliver a COVID vaccine.”

The COVAX facility, including the Advanced Market Commitment financing instrument, has signed up 64 self-financing countries and 92 countries eligible for support through that instrument, she said. Through COVAX, participating countries will be guaranteed initial doses to cover at least 3% of their population in the first phases of deployment, as supplies catch up with global demand, eventually reaching 20% of their population – enough to protect those at higher risk for severe COVID-19, Etienne explained.

“Our region has a strong legacy of immunization programs that give us a leg up as we plan for the future,” added Etienne.

PAHO is well prepared to offer technical cooperation to countries so they can prepare and implement their vaccination campaigns – “from planning and forecasting to communications, from regulations to the training of health personnel. Another benefit to our member states is that they can rely on our Revolving Fund, the biggest regional mechanism for self-financing countries, for the purchase and delivery of vaccines,” she said.

“So, I urge countries around the world to prepare for a coronavirus vaccine, but also to remain realistic, knowing that these preparations do not replace everything else we must do to save lives today,” Etienne concluded.

###

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 Director's Remarks, September 23: <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/weekly-press-briefing-covid-19-directors-opening-remarks-september-23-2020>

Recording of the media briefing September 23 (original audio): <https://youtu.be/xL8zTKlrE2Q>

Recording of the media briefing September 23 (English audio): <https://youtu.be/OHM5y5I9nVE>

PAHO COVID-19 website: www.paho.org/coronavirus

Media Contacts:

Leticia Linn: +1 202 974 3440 | +1 (202) 701 4005 | linnl@paho.org

Sebastian Oliel: +1 202 974 3459 | +1 (202) 316 5679 | oliels@paho.org

Ashley Baldwin: +1 202 974 3872 | +1 (202) 340 4025 | baldwinash@paho.org