

## **PAHO calls for closing vaccination gap generated by COVID-19 pandemic disruption**

*In 2020, vaccination rates against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis dropped by 18.2% while immunization against measles, mumps, and rubella declined by 13.9%, compared to 2019.*

**Washington, D.C., April 23, 2021 (PAHO)** – On the eve of Vaccination Week in the Americas, PAHO urged countries to close the immunization gap that resulted in hundreds of thousands of children missing vaccinations last year. The decline in immunization was partly due to interruptions in health services because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The call for stepped up immunization coincides with the April 24-30 Vaccination Week in the Americas and World Immunization Week, regional and global events when countries launch immunization campaigns. The 2021 theme – “Vaccines bring us closer” – is the need to focus on closing the immunization breach.

“The Americas has been tremendously successful in immunization against many serious diseases,” said PAHO Director Carissa F. Etienne. “We were the first region in the world to eliminate smallpox, polio, and rubella. But we are now seeing declines in immunization, and we must reverse that trend not only for the health of our children but also for the well-being of our entire society.”

In 2020 in the WHO Region of the Americas, 18.2% fewer children (474,395 in total) received all three shots of DPT3 vaccines against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, compared to 2019. Also in 2020, 13.9 percent fewer children (379,208 in total) received their dose of MMR1 vaccine against measles, mumps, and rubella, compared to the year before.

COVID-19 restrictions on movement contributed to fewer vaccinations. In addition, many people were reluctant to go to health facilities to request vaccinations for fear of COVID-19 transmission.

“The Americas has been at the forefront of reducing deadly and life-altering disease through vaccination,” said Dr. Cuauhtemoc Ruiz Matus, Chief of PAHO’s Immunization Unit. “In recent years, we have seen a dangerous decline. This year’s Vaccination Week in the Americas is a chance not only to celebrate the availability of immunization but also to get vaccination back on track.”

Reduced immunization in 2020 follows a longer-term trend. According to a recent PAHO report:

- In 2019, endemic transmission of measles was reestablished in Venezuela and Brazil.

- Between 2013 and 2019, the number of countries and territories reporting that 95% of children under 1 year of age had received all three DTP vaccine doses declined from 19 to 13.
- During the same period, the number of countries that were able to sustain at least 95% coverage with all three DTP doses for three or more years declined from 13 to 6.

Urging countries to increase immunization, Dr. Etienne called for government policies to strengthen public confidence in vaccination. She urged promotion of immunization during the COVID-19 pandemic and support for introduction of COVID-19 vaccines.

She also called for maintaining public health measures – physical distancing, mask wearing and proper hand hygiene – throughout the COVID-19 vaccination process and until the pandemic is defeated.

Amid the decline in immunization last year, there was good news. During the 2020 vaccination week, 16 countries immunized populations against influenza, prioritizing health care workers, older adults, and people with chronic illness. More than 100 million people were vaccinated, reducing the potential that health systems already taxed by COVID-19 could be overwhelmed by flu patients.

In 2020, 10 countries vaccinated more than 250,000 children and adults against measles. Nine countries vaccinated against polio, and eight countries immunized against HPV (human papilloma virus) during that week.

For over 40 years, PAHO's Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) has helped make the Americas a global leader in elimination and control of vaccine-preventable diseases – rubella, congenital rubella syndrome, measles, and neonatal tetanus. Since the creation of the EPI in 1977, countries have moved from using six vaccines in their national vaccination schemes to an average of more than 16 vaccines, which represents greater protection for the population.

**Media Advisory:**

*Launch of Vaccination Week in the Americas: 26 April 2021, 10:00 EDT;  
Watch the event on [PAHO's YouTube channel](#)  
[Register here.](#)*

**LINKS**

PAHO 19th Annual [Vaccination Week in the Americas \(VWA\)](#)  
[WHO World Immunization Week 2021](#)

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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.