

PAHO urges avoiding travel and large gatherings during the holidays

Advice offered on limiting indoor gatherings, travel, and public events

Washington, D.C., November 26, 2020 (PAHO) – Holiday season gatherings and travel involve risks and people should follow guidance of national and local health authorities to make the holidays as safe as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pan American Health Organization Assistant Director Jarbas Barbosa said today.

“During a pandemic, there is no such thing as a risk-free holiday season. Every gathering, every shopping trip, and every travel plan increases the chances of spreading the virus,” Barbosa told a press briefing in Washington. “It’s critical that everyone continue to practice the public health measures that we know are effective in controlling the spread of the virus,” such as wearing a mask in public, including in the presence of persons from other households and keeping a safe distance from others.

People should also avoid the 3Cs: spaces that are **c**losed, **c**rowded, or involve **c**lose contact with others, and wash their hands often. “These measures are especially important as we enter the holiday season” when communities congregate to mark religious celebrations and generations of families come together to give thanks,” Barbosa said.

“PAHO and WHO recommend that countries experiencing widespread transmission of the virus should seriously consider postponing or reducing mass gatherings. This is NOT the time to be hosting ANY large gatherings. Each country, city and community should base decisions about hosting public events on the latest available data – especially data that show where the virus is spreading and whether health systems have enough capacity to keep up with cases,” he added.

Even smaller Indoor gatherings can be especially risky because they bring together groups of people, young and old, from different households, who may not all be adhering to the same infection prevention measures, Barbosa warned. “They should be held outside when possible, and participants should wear masks and maintain social distance. If held indoors, limiting group size, and choosing well-ventilated areas can help reduce exposure,” he noted.

With respect to travel, people should be cautious, and the safest option is to stay home, he said. “PAHO does NOT recommend relying on laboratory tests for travelers. Yet we’ve seen countries across our region and throughout the world place testing at the heart of their travel policies. This cannot guarantee safe travel or eliminate the risks related to infected travelers, and resources can be used in other ways yielding a greater public health impact,” Barbosa said.

Reviewing the situation in the Americas, Barbosa said there have been more than 25 million cases and over 700,000 deaths, and in the last week alone there were 1.5 million cases, marking the highest weekly numbers since the start of the pandemic. “While a rapid surge of infections in the United States has been a major driver, cases are continuing to

accelerate in some countries of North, Central and South America as part of a mosaic of different epidemiological patterns we're seeing," Barbosa said.

He noted news about the efficacy of vaccines reported by various pharmaceutical companies, adding, "Many people are understandably encouraged by recent developments in the search for an effective COVID-19 vaccine, but we must continue to be patient and cautious because it will be months before a vaccine is widely available."

Barbosa said, "The individual decisions we make this holiday season won't just affect the people closest to us, they will also impact our communities." Throughout the pandemic, countries have changed how people work, go to school, and participate in civic life, "so that we can keep our friends and families as safe and healthy as possible. The holidays should be no different. People are planning virtual dinners, broadcasting virtual celebrations, and opting for smaller ceremonies, even if it means making personal sacrifices," he added.

#

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's press briefing on COVID-19 – <https://youtu.be/GPbq3aoj47U>

PAHO COVID-19 website: <https://www.paho.org/en/topics/coronavirus-infections/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-pandemic>

Technical guidance on adjusting public health measures: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/considerations-in-adjusting-public-health-and-social-measures-in-the-context-of-covid-19-interim-guidance>

CONTACTS:

Sebastian Oliel: +1 (202) 316 5679 | mediateam@paho.org
Daniel Epstein, +1 (301) 219-2105 mediateam@paho.org