



As COVID-19 continues to impact the Americas, dwindling vaccination rates leave countries susceptible to polio and other preventable diseases



Washington D.C., 21 September 2022 (PAHO) – While COVID-19 continues to take around 4,000 lives each week in the Americas, and monkeypox cases rise, the polio virus has now been detected among unvaccinated communities in New York. In light of this, the Pan American Health Organization Director (PAHO) has

called on countries to urgently strengthen surveillance and routine vaccination campaigns.

Although the United States has mounted a swift public health response following the detection, polio is a disease that “I never expected to see in our region again,” Dr Etienne said during a media briefing today.

“It’s been nearly 30 years since the Americas became the first global region to wipe out wild polio,” but “dwindling vaccination rates, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, have left many of our populations unprotected.”

Polio, which can spread quickly among communities with insufficient vaccination coverage, is not a treatable disease but is fully preventable with vaccines. Yet today, vaccination coverage has fallen below 80% in nearly all of South America, and 12 countries in the region are at High or Very High risk of experiencing an outbreak.

PAHO has been working closely with the United States and has issued several alerts to Member States to remain vigilant and take measures to proactively reach unvaccinated populations with a polio vaccine.

“We must not take the lifesaving power of vaccines for granted,” said Dr. Etienne.

The PAHO Director also urged countries of the region to step up their COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, particularly in the Caribbean, where a number of islands are falling behind.

“If we remain committed, we can keep COVID-19 under control,” she said. “Not by ignoring it but by continuing to make use of the many tools we have at our disposal to trace, and most importantly prevent, infections.”

This includes public health measures that must be promoted, particularly “in places where many remain unvaccinated, or where cases are climbing.”

Turning to the monkeypox outbreak in the region, the PAHO Director warned that cases are also on the rise in parts of the Americas and while deaths remain extremely rare, those with weakened immune systems are at risk of complications from monkeypox infection.

PAHO has been working on the expansion of testing capacity in the region but countries must “act now to control the spread,” particularly while vaccine supplies remain limited.

Active engagement of affected communities is crucial, urged Dr. Etienne. Testing and contact tracing can also have a significant impact on reducing transmission.

As PAHO prepares to meet with Ministers of Health from across the region at the Pan American Sanitary Conference, Dr. Etienne highlighted the opportunity to discuss challenges towards ensuring health in the region and make agreements on how to move forward.

This landmark event is not only a chance to look back and learn from the past but also an “opportunity to look towards the future and our vision of a more equitable region, in which we work together to improve health for all,” she said.

Links

- [Opening remarks](#)
- [COVID-19 - Weekly updates](#)
- [Monkeypox cases in the Americas](#)
- [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](#)

MEDIA CONTACTS

Luciana Viegas: + 1 202 981-8455

Ashley Baldwin: + 1 202 340-4025

Sebastian Oliel: +1 202 316-5679

mediateam@paho.org

www.paho.org

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.