

Regional Genomic Surveillance Network tracks COVID-19 virus variants throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, PAHO reports

The network coordinated by PAHO has detected the presence of at least one "variant of concern" in 47 countries and territories and all four in 11. PAHO Director says public health measures remain vital and calls for increased vaccine access to fight variants.

Washington, D.C. July 21, 2021 (PAHO) – Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa F. Etienne reported that the Americas' year-old COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network "keeps a close eye" on the emergence and spread of SARS-CoV-2 variants throughout the region.

"The network has been instrumental in monitoring the virus's spread within border regions and among travelers, who are often the first to introduce variants into a country," Dr. Etienne said during her weekly media briefing.

So far, 47 countries and territories in the Americas have detected at least one "variant of concern" and 11 have detected all four of them – alpha, beta, gamma, and delta.

Dr. Etienne explained that the Network started as a handful of public health labs in 2020, including the regional sequencing labs Fundação Oswaldo Cruz/FIOCRUZ - Brazil and Instituto de Salud Pública de Chile (ISPCH), which carry out sequencing for countries without local capacity. The Network has grown to include 24 labs in total, among them four additional reference laboratories – Mexico's Institute of Epidemiological Diagnostics and Reference (INDRE), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the University of West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago, and the Gorgas Institute in Panama.

“Together, and using science as a common language, countries committed to bolster their laboratory capacity, hire staff, and make surveillance a priority, building on the legacy of our region’s longstanding dengue and influenza surveillance and laboratory networks,” Dr. Etienne said. PAHO supports the network by standardizing laboratory protocols, conducting trainings, and donating supplies.

“The COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network is an example of the power of Pan-Americanism and the importance of working together to control this virus,” Dr. Etienne said. “We must bring the same spirit of collaboration and solidarity to other dimensions of our COVID-19 response, especially vaccines.”

Lack of vaccine access is creating an epidemiological divide

She stressed that lack of vaccine access is creating an epidemiological divide. “More and more, disease trends are showing a region divided by vaccine access,” Dr. Etienne said. “In countries with adequate vaccine supply, infections are decreasing; in places where vaccine coverage is still low, in those countries, infections remain high.”

She pointed out that COVID-19 cases are steadily declining in Costa Rica, where nearly one in three people are vaccinated. South American countries with higher rates of vaccinations, including Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina, are reporting sharp decreases in cases. Cases are decreasing across Canada and most of the United States.

But in Latin America and the Caribbean overall, only 15% of the population has been fully vaccinated, and some

countries, including Honduras and Haiti, have yet to reach 1%, she said. With its low vaccination rate, Honduras is seeing an increase in cases along its border. COVID-19 infections are increasing in most Central American countries, with Guatemala reporting high cases and hospitalizations.

In the Caribbean, both COVID-19 cases and deaths are spiking in Cuba, where conditions are especially acute in the province of Matanzas, Dr. Etienne said. Other smaller islands are also reporting an increase in infections, among them Martinique, which is experiencing a tripling of cases. Hotspots also persist in Amazonian states in Colombia and Peru.

“These trends illustrate how COVID-19 remains entrenched within our region, particularly in countries with low vaccination coverage,” Dr. Etienne said. She reiterated that public health measures, such as physical distancing, wearing masks, and avoiding crowds – as well as infection control through testing, contact tracing, quarantining, and isolation – remain vital.

In total in the past week, the Americas reported more than 967,000 new cases and 22,000 deaths, which reflects a slight decline from the week before.

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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.

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