

Cairo, 30 January 2022 – With the rapid spread of Omicron causing sharp increases in cases worldwide and leaving health systems overwhelmed, WHO urges for broader access to available COVID-19 vaccination in low coverage countries, prioritizing groups at higher risk of severe disease and death.

Weeks since its declaration as a variant of concern (VOC), the highly transmissible Omicron is now reported by almost every country in the world. While the Omicron VOC generally causes less severe disease compared to the Delta VOC, it can still lead to hospitalization and death, particularly in those who are unvaccinated.

Although millions of people have become affected by this latest VOC worldwide, there is still the good news that vaccines which have received WHO Emergency Use Listing provide a high level of protection against severe disease and death caused by Omicron, as they did with previous VOCs. Indeed, reports on deaths and hospitalization rates due to Omicron remain relatively stable in countries where vaccination rates are high.

As breakthrough infections in people who are fully vaccinated or have recovered from a previous infection are common with Omicron, WHO also recommends booster doses as coverage with primary series vaccination increases gradually for priority groups – from highest to lowest risk – to maximize impact.

The current focus must remain on reducing transmission, increasing vaccine coverage, preventing severe disease and death, and protecting health systems.

Although the goal is for every country to have vaccinated 70% of its population by mid-2022, 123 out of 194 WHO Member States (63.4%) had not yet vaccinated 40% of their populations by mid-January 2022, with 36 not even having reached 10%.

Vaccine inequity is another major challenge which threatens hard-won gains, with high-income countries having administered about 14 times more doses per inhabitant so far compared to low-income countries.

Reports from 24 January inform that 34% of the population in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is fully vaccinated, and 8% is partially vaccinated. Five countries need an additional 41 million doses to vaccinate 40% of their populations, while vaccination coverage remains below 10% in six countries. WHO and partners are exerting extra efforts to support these countries in reaching 40% coverage over the next few months.

Vaccine supply is not the only challenge in the Region. Massive vaccination campaigns in countries with low coverage are challenged by limited political attention, low priority for vaccination, reduced access to convenient and quality service, emergency and security situations, weak health system capacity, vaccine hesitancy, and poor community engagement.

Since its emergence, SARS-CoV-2 has continued to evolve. To date, WHO has designated five variants of concern – Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Omicron – due to their transmissibility, disease severity, and/or capacity for immune escape.

In the battle against Omicron, vaccines remain the most effective public health intervention to protect people from COVID-19. Vaccination stimulates the body's immune response to the virus, which not only protects from the variants currently in circulation – including Omicron – but is also likely to provide protection from future variants.

When it is your turn, make sure to get vaccinated – if your vaccination involves two doses, it is essential to receive both – while it also remains crucial to regularly adhere to all public and social health measures for full protection.

Tuesday 30th of April 2024 11:25:10 PM