

20 December 2020 – This winter, as countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region head into an increasingly concerning period characterized by escalating cases of COVID-19 and persistent transmission of the virus, we must be more vigilant than ever to protect our loved ones and ourselves. The pressures of living with COVID-19 for such an extended time is affecting community well-being and morale, and leading to fatigue and complacency. Quite simply, many people are not as strict as they should be in adhering to the measures that we know protect us from the virus.

As the approaching festive season is upon us, a time where families and friends gather across generations to celebrate the new year and observe religious holidays, the WHO Regional Office urges people to avoid non-essential travel and large gatherings in order to prevent COVID-19 surges. While we know that this will require sacrifices and compromises, the holiday season should not provide an excuse to relax the social measures aimed to decrease spread of the virus.

Countries that are experiencing increased caseloads and continued widespread transmission should seriously consider suspending large community, religious and family gatherings. Each country and community should base local decisions on their assessment of risk, understanding the extent of disease transmission and the mitigating measures and capacities available in their health systems.

Smaller gatherings should ideally be held in open spaces where possible, characterized by limited attendance and duration, and ensure the wearing of masks and physical distancing for participants. If unable to convene outdoors, ensuring proper ventilation and smaller group sizes can help in reducing exposure although small indoor gatherings are also not without risk.

The value of mental health care has been highlighted during the current pandemic, especially for the elderly, children, and those suffering from pre-existing mental health conditions. As this exceptional year comes to an end, it is understandable that we might experience feelings of stress and anxiety even stronger over this period of the year. This tension has aggravated already existing mental health conditions due to fear of illness, anxiety over vulnerable family and friends, the loneliness of isolation and quarantine, and associated stigma. Connecting virtually with our loved ones and supporting those who may be feeling isolated during this festive season is especially important: there is an important need to focus on maintaining our own physical and mental health, as well as that of our loved ones.

The choice is in our hands. The decisions made on an individual level will ultimately impact our families and communities, especially for those who are at a higher risk, and those who health workers who have been working so tirelessly treating the sick.

Avoiding spaces that are closed, crowded, or involve close personal contact, in combination with practicing hand hygiene, proper respiratory etiquette, and using a mask, will keep ourselves and our communities safe.

Now more than ever this holiday season, this is a time for caring and sharing blessings with others. Our communities need to come together in solidarity to support and encourage one another while keeping all our families and neighbors healthy this winter.

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