

Globally, almost 4.6 million new cases were reported to WHO last week, another new high record since the beginning of the pandemic, with a record 78 000 new deaths reported last week. Total cases reported to WHO have surpassed 75 million and there have been over 1.6 million deaths.

At the regional level, we have been seeing an overall trend of cases and deaths decreasing in the last few weeks, with 15 out of 22 countries reporting decreasing cases, and 13 countries reporting decreasing deaths.

We continue to work closely with all countries in the Region to monitor the situation and provide specific guidance and recommendations to enhance response interventions. The coming weeks are critical, as we mark a time when people traditionally gather to celebrate the holiday season and temperatures drop even further in winter.

As part of its updated guidance on mask use in the context of COVID-19, WHO advises the use of masks as part of a comprehensive package of prevention and control measures to limit the spread of the virus. Especially in indoor settings, masks should be worn if air ventilation is poor, or where physical distancing is not possible.

I urge people in the Region to avoid non-essential travel and large gatherings in order to limit the spread of the virus and 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.

We are all closely following the good news that recently came at the end of this difficult year. COVID-19 vaccines are finally within reach, with several breakthroughs on the horizon. Three safe and efficacious vaccines have been developed in record time and vaccination roll-out has already commenced, including in our region. WHO is working with partners to ensure the equitable availability of the vaccine, including to low-middle income countries and low income countries.

The coming period in our Region will be challenging for us all, and making sure that we reduce

fear, stigma and hesitancy will be key. We count on you, the media, as key partners, to play a critical role in ensuring that your coverage about COVID-19 vaccines is informed and based on the facts. This is not the time to be sensationalist or look for the headlines.

Last week, South African and UK health officials informed WHO and the public about different variants of the virus that causes COVID-19 circulating in their countries. As of 22 December, the UK variant has been detected in small numbers in Australia, Denmark, Italy, Iceland and the Netherlands. While both variants have one common change, the virus variants reported from South Africa and the UK are different and sequence analysis revealed that they originated separately.

The UK has reported that this new variant transmits more easily but there is no indication so far that it is more likely to cause severe disease, or have an impact on vaccines. Studies are underway to determine if the increased spread is associated with the virus variant itself or changes in people's behaviour over the past several months, or a combination of both.

Viruses change as they circulate, and these changes can lead to changes in characteristics of the virus. Yet while the viruses change, the way we can protect ourselves remain the same, and these measures must be followed diligently, now more than ever, to help slow and eventually stop the virus spread.

Variants identified in UK and South Africa highlight the importance of sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 and sharing of sequence data internationally. A number of countries in our Region have the capacity to conduct sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 viruses, and I advise these countries to increase sequencing where possible and to share their data internationally.

In countries with no sequencing capacity, WHO will facilitate the transfer of positive specimens to international WHO COVID-19 collaborating centers for advanced testing.

The more we know about this virus, the more chance we have to better control it. We need to suppress transmission of all SARS-CoV-2 viruses as quickly as we can, before they have more opportunity to change and spread.

As we prepare to celebrate over the coming weeks, we should take every precaution to keep ourselves and others safe, especially those of us living in areas with high COVID-19 transmission.

We need to follow through on our commitments as individuals, as communities and as governments in the coming months: to continue to build public health surveillance, to work with communities, to maintain public health and social measures, to continue to take those actions to be able to protect ourselves and our loved ones and save lives.

We can keep the transmission down by knowing and lowering our risk. This is the best gift we can all give each other: the gift of health, life, and hope for a safer, better future.

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