

Cairo, 1 December 2021 – COVID-19 continues to take a toll on people’s lives and health across the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond, spreading fear and frustration. The arrival of the new variant of concern Omicron has aggravated the situation and poses potential threats to the hard-won gains of the past two years.

Recent trends of COVID-19 spread in the Region are mixed. While some countries have documented recent declines and deaths, nine and three countries recorded increase in cases and deaths, respectively, over the past week. As of 29 November 2021, over 16.7 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 309,500 deaths were reported across the Region.

Two years into the pandemic, COVID-19 fatigue is clear. This pandemic has impacted each and every one of us, altering all aspects of our lives. We understand the enormous pressure governments and communities face in finding the balance between keeping economies active and mitigating the risk of COVID-19. However, the emergence of the newly detected Omicron variant of concern shows us just how vigilant and engaged we must all remain.

There is still a lot that we do not know about this new variant. WHO is working with our networks of experts across the globe to determine its impact on disease transmission, disease severity, and whether it may evade the immunity we have built up through either previous infection or through vaccines. The answers to these and other questions will take days to weeks to answer. WHO will continue to keep the local community informed as we learn more.

How should we respond to the emergence of this new variant and mitigate its potential impact? The answer is quite straightforward – we need to maintain and scale up all of the measures that we know work against the COVID-19 virus, including vaccinations, masks, physical distancing, cleaning hands, and ensuring good ventilation. And we must work according to the principles of transparency, solidarity and equity.

Specifically, we are asking all Member States to strengthen disease surveillance so that they can identify early possible cases of COVID-19 due to the Omicron variant and respond rapidly. They should be alert to new clusters of COVID-19 cases and investigate these expeditiously. It is also important to scale up testing, including the genomic sequencing that is necessary to identify new variants. Sharing information about the variant with WHO is vital so that we can all track the evolution of its spread across countries, regions, and the globe.

We should also reflect on the potential reasons for the emergence of new variants. Among these is low vaccination coverage that allows the virus to continue to circulate and mutate. Unfortunately, persistent vaccine inequity remains one of the starkest and most concerning features of the international response to the pandemic, leading to enormous disparities in vaccination coverage across the world. Of course, it is the low- and low-middle-income countries that have the lowest vaccination coverage. And it is in these settings where the risk of emergence of variants is greatest. In our Region, vaccination coverage hasn't yet reached 10% in seven countries.

We should all be troubled by the fact that more than 80% of the world's vaccines have gone to G20 countries, while low-income countries, most of them in Africa, have received just 0.6% of all vaccines. The longer that these inequities persist, the greater the chance of more variants, and the longer that we will all have to endure this pandemic with its enormous public health, economic and social consequences. Indeed, no one is safe until everyone is safe.

In the northern hemisphere we are now entering the winter season, where the risks of disease transmission are potentially greater. These risks are heightened by inequitable vaccine coverage, increasing COVID-19 fatigue and lack of adherence to the personal protective measures that we know work. Even if you have been vaccinated, it is vital that you continue to wear a mask, maintain physical distancing, and practice hand hygiene. We have said repeatedly that vaccines alone will not bring an end to the pandemic. We must all play our role as individuals, communities, the private sector, and government.

Today, I call on all people of the Region – but most especially our political and community leaders – to take the warning issued by Omicron very seriously. Despite almost two years of a difficult and tiring struggle against COVID-19, we must redouble our efforts to bring the pandemic to a close. But the good news is that, even in the face of a new variant, we have the tools that enable us to be proactive, and not just reactive.

Yesterday, the Director-General of WHO addressed a Special Session of the World Health Assembly, during which he warned against complacency and COVID-19 fatigue. He reminded us that although we may be done with COVID-19, the virus is not done with us.

In a consensus decision aimed at protecting the world from future infectious diseases crises, the

World Health Assembly today agreed to kickstart a global process to draft and negotiate a convention, agreement or other international instrument under the Constitution of the World Health Organization to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

In the spirit of our vision for the Region of “Health for All by All”, I hope that every one of you commit to playing your part in our collective effort to end this pandemic once and for all.

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