

20 April 2022 – As of 16 April, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has reported almost 21.7 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and almost 342 000 deaths. Compared to last week, this week we saw a 21% decrease in the number of newly reported cases, and a 24% decrease in newly reported deaths. However, while the trends may seem encouraging, it is important to note that we have seen an increase in the number of new cases in 2 countries and an increase in deaths in 6 countries.

But even though deaths are decreasing to some of the lowest numbers since the start of the pandemic, transmission remains high, vaccination coverage remains low in several countries, and the relaxation of public health and social measures is still being widely observed, allowing continued transmission and the risk of new variants emerging.

In the coming months, our Region will host a number of important mass gathering events, including umra and hajj pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Together with WHO headquarters and partners, we are working with authorities in these countries to make sure that systems are in place to protect millions of travellers from around the world and prevent further transmission of COVID-19 and other emerging infectious diseases. Additionally, as part of WHO's mandate to promote health and well-being, we are working with FIFA and Qatar to use this global event as an opportunity to spread awareness on healthy lifestyles to all age groups around the world.

We continue to closely monitor circulating SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern, and to encourage all countries to scale up and sustain surveillance, laboratory testing and genome sequencing capacity to identify these variants early.

To date, 20 countries in the Region have reported the Delta variant of concern, and 17 countries have officially reported the Omicron variant of concern. Omicron remains the dominant variant circulating regionally and globally, and WHO continues to monitor several descendent lineages under this variant that have been reported from several countries, including the United States of America, South Africa and some countries across Europe.

Seventeen countries in the Region currently have domestic genome sequencing capacity to detect variants of concern, and the remaining 5 countries receive WHO support to sequence samples within the regional reference laboratories for sequencing. WHO has started the

process of establishing a strong regional genome surveillance network, in collaboration with Member States and partners, that will contribute to regional efforts to expand and enhance sequencing capacity for high-threat pathogens.

Vaccination and adherence to personal hygiene measures (such as mask use, hand hygiene and social distancing) remain the best ways to prevent the virus from spreading and causing infection or death. Having a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose increases protection against all outcomes.

But it is important to note here that extensive use of multiple booster doses in a small number of countries will not end the pandemic. The global and regional priority is to achieve full protection of the highest priority groups in all countries with full vaccination and a booster dose first, and then advance to lower priority groups based on vaccine supply and health system capacity.

As of 19 April, 42% of the Region's population is fully vaccinated, 8% are partially vaccinated, and 9% are booster vaccinated. Only 5 of 22 countries across the Region have met the global goal of vaccinating 70% of the population in every country, despite enough vaccine stocks being available. Our key focus now is to work with countries to ensure that vaccination campaigns reach all people – especially the most vulnerable – and that vaccine hesitancy among populations is addressed with the facts: vaccines save lives, and many people who are severely infected, hospitalized or die are under-vaccinated or unvaccinated.

Earlier this month, the COVID-19 Emergency Committee met and agreed that the pandemic remains a public health emergency of international concern. This is not yet the time to drop our guard. We need to work even harder together to save lives. Epidemics and pandemics are a fact of nature, and we know that this may not be the last pandemic. But it is in our hands to reduce the risk to this generation and to future generations.

Our experience with COVID-19 needs to be remembered as a positive lesson that allowed us to come together, using all the tools and resources at our disposal, and make incredible advances in protecting all people, everywhere, with no country left behind, regardless of political or socioeconomic status.

Since the very beginning of the pandemic, WHO has emphasized the critical role of individuals

and communities in the global and regional response. We have seen how individual actions can have an impact on transmission of the virus and the course of the pandemic. Today, our actions as individuals and communities continue to play a key role in this collective battle against a common enemy. Any action we take – by adhering to public health and social measures and getting vaccinated – can make a significant difference. As we approach the last mile, this is not the time for complacency. Ending this pandemic and saving lives should still be everyone's top priority.

I wish you all Ramadam Karim and a Happy Easter.

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