

Cairo, 22 December 2021 - A year ago, the COVID-19 vaccine rollout had brought us hope that we could end the acute phase of the pandemic by the end of 2021. Instead, as we enter the third year of the pandemic, the world remains very much in its grip. Globally, COVID-19 has so far claimed more than five million lives and infected over 270 million people. The 22 countries/territories of the Eastern Mediterranean Region will likely report over 17 million cases and more than 314,000 deaths by the end of the year.

Unfortunately, the situation remains quite worrying, especially with new variants of concern emerging. The arrival of Delta and Omicron during 2021 made it clear that COVID-19 is far from over and that we are still just learning about it.

COVID-19 will continue to evolve in the months to come; simply because the virus continues to mutate. This is what viruses do: they change as they circulate. Yet, the way we can protect ourselves remains unchanged and progress has been made in developing effective tools to prevent and control the pandemic, including vaccine and therapeutics.

The only way we can stop the virus from spreading is by following the prevention guidelines against COVID-19 persistently, now more than ever. We have three reasons to do so. First, the winter season has been characterized by spikes of cases and deaths. Second, the holiday season with gatherings of friends and families. Third, the arrival of Omicron, which has the capacity to become a dominant variant in a matter of weeks wherever it emerges. Fourteen countries in our Region have now reported this variant of concern.

We are working with technical partners to understand the potential impact of Omicron on existing vaccines, diagnosis and treatment. We have preliminary data from studies, but it is important that we have more evidence before drawing conclusions.

The holiday season is upon us. These times must remain happy times. Yet, the failure to apply the established public health and social measures could cause alarming surges in the number of COVID-19 cases and related deaths. More cases could lead to more hospital admissions and overwhelm health systems once again.

I know that everyone is tired of hearing about COVID-19 and of all the restrictions it imposes, but we need to face an undeniable fact, regardless of how we feel: the virus is still very much present among us, and if we disregard this truth, we are in fact directly contributing to its ability to endanger and disrupt our lives. Anyone who ignores COVID-19 is actually perpetuating it.

I wish I did not have to tell you that we still need to live with COVID-19, but I must. As I must also remind you that increasing levels of social mixing provide the virus with the highest opportunity to spread.

I would also like to stress once again that the vaccine protects you effectively from severe disease and death and protects the health system from being overwhelmed. However, being vaccinated does not protect you completely from contracting the virus. That is why we urge everyone, everywhere, to continue to diligently follow all established precautions. We must all do it all.

Preventive measures, including physical or social distancing, quarantining, ventilation of indoor spaces, covering coughs and sneezes, and hand washing, are our only weapons to stay armed in the fight against the pandemic.

People can enjoy smaller gatherings, preferably in open or well-ventilated spaces, with attendees wearing masks and maintaining a physical distance. Always remember that indoor gatherings, even smaller ones, are breeding grounds for the virus.

Everyone should get vaccinated, remain vigilant for signs and symptoms of COVID-19, and always adhere to preventive measures, whether vaccinated or not. We also strongly encourage those who are unwell, those who have not been fully vaccinated and those at high risk of developing severe complications to avoid non-essential travel and large gatherings altogether.

Minimizing COVID-19 risks is not a matter of chance, but a matter of choice. That choice is in our hands. Decisions made on an individual level impact our entire families and, by extension, our entire communities.

I need to also remind us that vaccine inequity threatens many high-risk and vulnerable populations in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. More than 8.5 billion doses have now been administered globally and over 500 million doses in the Region. However, high- and upper-middle-income countries have administered about twice the number of doses than have low- and low-middle-income countries.

In countries where people have barely received one or two doses, while waiting for boosters, let's boost vaccine coverage.

In the Region, we are still a long way from reaching our targets to vaccinate 40% of the population of all our Member States by the end of this year, and 70% by the middle of next year. In fact, of 22 countries/territories, only nine have reached the end-of-year target, while six have vaccinated even less than 10% of their populations.

We continue to work closely with all countries in the Region to monitor the situation and provide essential response elements in the spirit of our vision for 2023: Health for All by All.

The coming weeks are critical. Let's all work together to make it a happy holiday season and a safe new year for all.



[» Celebrating the holiday season safely in 2021 during COVID-19](#)

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