

Cairo, 28 November 2021. The emergence of the new COVID-19 variant of concern, Omicron, is a major cause of concern for the people of WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region – just as it is across the world. As of 24 November, the Region has reported over 16.7 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 308,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic. These numbers are now at risk of rising again sharply unless collectively we recommit to taking the steps that we know limit the spread of the virus.

With the approaching winter, temperatures are dropping across the Region, leading people to congregate in closed spaces. Combined with still low rates of adherence to preventative measures such as mask use and physical distancing, WHO is extremely concerned that increasing cases and deaths may be reported over the coming weeks. Unvaccinated people are most at risk of severe and complicated infection, hospitalization and death.

The new variant of concern, Omicron, has many mutations that require detailed study. But preliminary evidence suggests there may be an increased risk of disease transmission, as well as reinfection in persons who have previously been infected.

So far, the new designated variant has already been reported in countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. The variant has not been officially announced in the 22 countries and territories of our Region, but we all know that it is just a matter of time before the first case is reported.

All these indicators highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic is still far from over. Variants of concern pose one of the most serious threats to our collective efforts in defeating the virus. The more COVID-19 circulates, the more opportunities it will have to mutate, and the longer it will take to control.

We know that if we act collectively, as counties and as communities, we can change the course of the pandemic, and prevent new mutations from arising. This is possible by increasing rates of vaccination, practicing the public health and social measures that are proven to work, resisting COVID-19 fatigue, and countering the abundant misinformation that is making our work so much harder. We must not be forced to continuously chase the virus – we have the tools to get ahead of it and we must use these in a spirit of determination and cooperation.

WHO is closely monitoring the Omicron variant and other variants of concern. We are working continuously with Member States and our network of researchers across the globe to better understand more about these mutations, including their transmissibility, implications for reinfection and disease severity, and their impact on diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines.

Meanwhile, we urge all people to reduce their risk of exposure to the virus, including its new mutations: get vaccinated, wear a mask, maintain physical distance, avoid poorly ventilated or crowded spaces, keep your hands clean, and cough or sneeze into your elbow.

In addition, WHO strongly encourages all countries to enhance surveillance and virus sequencing, share genome data with public databases, and report initial cases/clusters to WHO, while also continuing to implement the measures that we know work. Across our Region, only about one quarter of people are fully vaccinated and in 7 of 22 countries/territories, the vaccination rate remains below 10%. So, we have to use all the tools and measures that we have at hand.

The quicker we implement these preventive measures, the faster we can contain the virus and stop it from evolving.

We are now at a turning point. COVID-19 has been a powerful demonstration of the need for a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach. All countries must work together across geographical, cultural, ideological and linguistic divides. No one is safe until everyone is safe. This is our vision for the Region of “Health for All by All”.

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