

Cairo, 21 July 2022 – Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region have been reporting a continuous increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths over the last 6 consecutive weeks, with a daily average reaching 18 000 cases and 31 deaths. Easing or lifting the proven public health measures such as mask wearing and social distancing has been associated with increased transmission of the Omicron variant and sub-variants in 17 countries across the Region, contributing to an increase in cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

“This current trend shows that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over,” said Dr Ahmed Al Mandhari, the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. “We try to forget COVID-19, but the virus has not forgotten us. In fact, it is taking advantage of our complacency to spread and mutate. I call on all countries to maintain compliance to effective public health and social measures and to increase vaccination coverage.”

Booster doses must be taken when offered as these will help to protect lives, particularly among those most vulnerable, especially the elderly, those with co-morbidities and health workers. Although countries with high vaccination coverage are still seeing increasing cases, the severity of the disease is generally milder, resulting in fewer hospitalizations and deaths.

Complete vaccine coverage in the Region is still lagging the global target of 70% of the total population by mid-2022. As of 18 July 2022, 45% of the Region’s population was fully vaccinated. Low-risk perception due to the decline in cases during the previous 2 months leads to hesitancy to take the vaccine. Lack of convenient access to the vaccine also contributes to the limited progress in coverage.

“When a surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths occurs, we become extremely concerned that our health systems are put on further pressure. Vaccines gave us the upper hand over the virus now. Let’s use them and protect the most vulnerable in our communities and alleviate the stress on health workers and intensive care units,” Dr Al Mandhari added.

On 8 July 2022, WHO’s Emergency Committee on COVID-19 concluded that the virus remains a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The rapid circulation of Omicron sub-variants, reduced levels of testing and sequencing, and persisting vaccine injustice are sources of concern.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Region has reported more than 22 195 674 confirmed COVID-19 cases and nearly 343 876 deaths. WHO's Regional Office is working with countries to maintain surveillance, testing, and genome sequencing capacities, accelerate COVID-19 vaccination to reach coverage targets and strengthen health systems' resilience.

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