

A joint communiqué by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, the International Association of Dental Students and the International Pharmaceutical Students Federation
COVID-19 in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region

The novel coronavirus COVID-19 has become a global pandemic affecting and challenging the lives of millions of people and communities all over the world. There are more than 4 million cases of this infectious disease globally, and it has spread among communities in all 22 countries and territories in the World Health Organization's Eastern Mediterranean Region. Countries are taking varying levels of restrictive measures to stop the spread and mitigate the impact of the pandemic, with many social and economic consequences for individuals and communities.

How are young people affected by COVID-19?

People of any age can be infected with COVID-19, including young people aged 15–24. Although the young are less likely than older people to become seriously ill with COVID-19, the pandemic is still having a huge impact on the lives of this group, in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond. Government measures to stop the spread of the disease such as lockdowns, closure of schools and physical distancing pose many challenges, including interruptions to education and daily routines, increasing levels of domestic violence, stress and mental health issues. Furthermore, faced with a shortage of health care workers, many countries are pushing health care students who are approaching graduation to the front lines to join the fight against the virus, placing them in stressful situations and increasing their risk of infection.

Yet young people can rise to these challenges, help build resilience in their communities and drive social change during the pandemic – provided they are heard, empowered, engaged and given the chance to lead.

Opportunities for youth engagement

WHO's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has produced a youth engagement framework, Youth for Health, which identifies three key objectives in any initiative to engage young people: empowerment, action and participation. In the case of engagement, WHO country missions, health and youth ministries, and other United Nations agencies can meaningfully engage young people in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic by:

Empowerment: engage young people in platforms and mechanisms that elevate and amplify their voices during the pandemic. Recommended actions:

Develop a repository with easy access to all information material on COVID-19 addressing the challenges facing young people and how to deal with those challenges.

Establish youth-focused social media initiatives targeting specific issues, such as mental health, domestic violence and access to education, as mechanisms for reaching a wide range of young people during the pandemic and building a community interested in volunteering, exchanging knowledge and spreading awareness among their peers.

Initiate youth storytelling programmes and events featuring first-person stories at country and local levels, to allow young people to share and learn from others' experiences during the pandemic.

Action: Engage young people in positive, healthy norms and practices and the design and delivery of COVID-19 health promotion initiatives and health services. Recommended actions:

Develop and deliver ongoing online capacity-building programmes to give young people the knowledge and skills they need to protect themselves effectively, lead in taking care of their families and support their communities during the pandemic.

Support young people in designing and delivering health awareness campaigns and initiatives, so that they are actively engaged in COVID-19 health promotion.

Prioritize the identification, recruitment, training and deployment of young people as members of national and local health workforces during the pandemic, while ensuring decent working conditions and personal protective measures against COVID-19.

Participation: Ensure that young people can engage with decision-making bodies leading the

response against COVID-19 at national and regional level. Recommended actions:

Support youth advocacy coalitions and provide both technical and institutional support to youth-led and student organizations at local level working on COVID-19 response initiatives.

Establish dialogue opportunities through regular online and offline engagements between young people and senior managers in governments and WHO country missions to capture youth needs and recommendations during the pandemic.

Optimizing action by young people

Young people, represented by youth-led and student organizations in the Region such as the International Federation of Medical Students' Association, International Association of Dental Students, and International Pharmaceutical Students Federation, can play an active role as valuable stakeholders by:

raising awareness among their peers on how to protect themselves and their families during the pandemic and what actions they can take to slow the spread of the disease, particularly good infection prevention and control practices;

identifying and collecting data on the specific issues facing young people and health care students at local level during the pandemic;

reaching out to fellow young people and creating local support groups to deal with challenges they face during the pandemic such as stress, domestic violence and coping with change;

distributing information resources to their local chapters and empowering them to lead local initiatives; and

reporting back to and collaborating with other stakeholders to support youth action at local level.

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