

23 August 2022 – Good afternoon and welcome to today's press briefing on the latest updates on monkeypox and COVID-19.

As of 20 August, 7 countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have officially reported 35 laboratory-confirmed cases of monkeypox to WHO, with no associated deaths.

Globally, the number of weekly reported new cases was regularly increasing until last week when a decrease of 21% was reported.

Since 1 January 2022, 96 Member States have reported more than 40 000 laboratory-confirmed cases to WHO, including 12 deaths.

The monkeypox outbreak continues to spread to more countries in the 6 WHO regions. While it is predominantly affecting men who have sex with men, every one of us is at risk. We have received reports of infection among children and women in our Region and around the world.

WHO's Director-General declared monkeypox a public health emergency of international concern on 23 July 2022. This is to help everyone recognize the risk and take all possible preventative measures. Stigma and discrimination can only delay the response and deflect our attention from what needs to be done. Our collective focus must be on an effective public health response that will stop transmission and contain the outbreak.

Most people with monkeypox can recover safely at home with supportive treatment. However, in some cases the disease can cause severe illness with complications that could lead to death. This is especially true for vulnerable groups, such as people with pre-existing medical conditions. New information is still unfolding about monkeypox, its mode of transmission, and vaccine efficacy.

Our response to monkeypox must be built on sound public health principles and practice. Every effort must be made to control human-to-human spread of monkeypox through early

case-finding and diagnosis, isolation and contact tracing. Information is a powerful tool: those most at risk need to have information on how to protect themselves and others.

We must also scale up surveillance, improve clinical management, and implement infection prevention and control measures, including how to prevent spread to health workers. And we continue to accelerate research studies into the effectiveness of vaccines, therapeutics, and other tools.

Vaccines are an additional, supplementary tool. As of now, vaccine supplies are limited, and we still do not know to what extent the vaccine works. However, when vaccines are available, WHO recommends targeted vaccination for people exposed to someone with monkeypox and those at high risk of exposure, including health workers and laboratory workers.

As the United Nation's leading health agency, WHO continues to coordinate and provide information and guidance to Member States and partners. As we review new findings from ongoing studies and research, we will continue to inform countries and the public of the outcome of these studies and adapt our outbreak response and guidance as needed.

Moving on to updates about COVID-19, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has reported over almost 23 million cases and almost 350 000 deaths since the start of the pandemic. While public health and social measures have been reduced, COVID-19 still poses a threat to us all. People are still being infected and dying. In the past week alone, more than 80 000 people were infected and more than 600 died of COVID-19 in our Region, and over 5.4 million new cases and 15 000 deaths were reported globally.

This pandemic is not over and COVID-19 is not going away. We are going to have to learn to live with this virus – but this does not mean ignoring those measures that can protect us and our loved ones.

We have learned several important lessons and developed practical tools that helped adapt our response, not just against COVID-19 but also other health threats.

We call on countries to maintain and continue to strengthen their surveillance efforts, including testing and sequencing. This will enable us to monitor the impact of the virus in terms of transmission, hospitalization, death, and vaccine effectiveness.

We urge everyone to continue following public health and social measures. I am personally asking you to make sure that you get fully vaccinated and boosted when presented with a COVID-19 vaccine. This is particularly important if you are above 60 years of age or vulnerable because of a pre-existing medical condition. Vaccines save lives and protect health systems from being overburdened. They allowed us to reopen societies and our economies without placing anyone at increased risk.

As of today, almost 46% of people in our Region are fully vaccinated, with over 790 million doses administered. While the vaccine does not fully protect from COVID-19, it is effective at preventing severe forms of illness and deaths. Yet many people have not yet received the vaccine and are still at risk of severe illness or death.

Recently, WHO authorized a new vaccine for COVID-19. The Valneva VLA2001 vaccine. A new specific recommendation prioritizes this vaccine for pregnant women, given the adverse consequences of COVID-19 disease during pregnancy and the favorable safety profile of the Valneva vaccine.

Learning to live with COVID-19 does not mean we pretend it is not there. Faced with the challenge of monkeypox, we must act pragmatically and effectively. We are all accountable, along with countries and individuals to stop transmission of these diseases. It means that we use the tools we have to protect ourselves and others as part of our regional Vision 2023: health for all by all.

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