

28 August 2020 – As of 26 August 2020, a total of 1 862 635 COVID-19 cases has been reported in the Eastern Mediterranean Region since the start of the novel coronavirus outbreak, which represents 8.0% of the global burden of more than 23 million cases reported to date.

Some countries in the Region have seen an upsurge in COVID-19 cases after lifting lockdowns, easing public health measures, or as a result of other concurrent emergency situations. Libya reached a new daily record of cases and deaths this week, while a rise in cases in Lebanon that began before the recent devastating explosion in Beirut has been picking up speed. The Gaza Strip has seen confirmed cases of COVID-19 outside of quarantine centres for the first time, and has imposed a 48-hour curfew to try to control the outbreak. Other countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia are also witnessing upsurges of varying degrees.

A different combination of factors may be causing the upsurge in each country, including movement of migrants, mass religious gatherings and sociopolitical issues, among others. To address the situation, the WHO Regional Office has formed a taskforce to work closely with these Member States, undertake an evidence-based situation analysis, explore the most effective rapid response options and provide technical and logistical support, when and where needed. Similar circumstances may lead to increased cases elsewhere. The taskforce is assigned to facilitate an exchange of information and lessons learned among these and other countries of the Region.

Eight months after the pandemic began, we are seeing health system responses maturing across the Region, which is a positive sign that we are moving in the right direction. Given the importance of health system development, a dedicated pillar is being added to our regional COVID-19 Incident Management Support Team to enhance our efforts in building resilient health systems for responding to the pandemic while maintaining the provision of essential public health services.

Together with our partners, we have been developing a comprehensive set of back-to-school guidelines and risk communication materials to guide students, parents, teachers and administrators on how to protect themselves and prevent spread of the virus in educational settings. WHO has also published new advice on the use of masks for children in the community in the context of COVID-19, to provide guidance to decision-makers and the public and child health professionals to inform policy on this issue.

WHO has also updated its interim guidance on home care for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and management of their contacts. We need to ensure that community and home caregivers have appropriate training, information and guidance on how to care for patients, as well as how to minimize the risk of infection, including training to recognize signs that a COVID-19 patient's condition is worsening so that they can be referred to a health facility.

Based on new available knowledge and evidence about COVID-19, WHO has developed and published a new set of guidance focusing on specific sectors, including hotels, accommodation entities, cargo ships and fishing vessels.

Being committed to our regional vision of Health for All by All, I would like to reiterate the importance of solidarity, partnership, inter- and intragovernmental collaboration and joint action in these challenging times. The risk of resurgence in COVID-19 cases after lifting the restrictions is high, and countries in the Region should maintain strong public health measures to limit the spread of the infection. The only solution is to work together to combat this pandemic on all fronts by bringing down the curve and controlling the transmission.

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