

11 October 2020, Cairo □ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 67th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean will be held virtually for the first time ever. Health ministers and high-level representatives of the 22 countries of WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, along with partner organizations and civil society, will connect online to discuss health issues during the two-day session on 12–13 October 2020.

His Excellency President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt will deliver a keynote speech through video recording to the inaugural session, which begins on Monday 12 October at 10:00 a.m.

WHO's Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and the Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, as well as the Chair of the previous 66th session of the Regional Committee, H.E. Dr Saeed Namaki, Minister of Health and Medical Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran, will address the opening session.

Representatives from countries will discuss key priority public health issues, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic featuring prominently on the agenda.

COVID-19 is having a major effect in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, as elsewhere, and the Representatives will review its evolution and current status, including the response to the pandemic across the Region. They will discuss the direct impact of COVID-19 on morbidity and mortality and the wider impact of the pandemic on essential health services and on WHO's strategy going forwards.

While some countries have experienced intermittent declines or a stabilization of case numbers in recent weeks, new outbreaks and resurgences persist. At the same time, access to health services is being compromised as scarce resources are diverted to fight the pandemic and social restriction measures such as lockdowns disrupt service provision. Moreover, fear and misinformation are deterring people from accessing health facilities for services such as immunization, elective surgery and the management of chronic diseases, reversing hard-won health gains. As we continue to respond to the pandemic and ensure continuity of health services, we need to build/strengthen our health systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also compounded challenges to the availability of medicines and vaccines through the effect of lockdowns on the supply chain, leading to shortages of medical products and increases in prices. A new regional strategy to improve access to medicines and vaccines has been developed taking into account the lessons learned during the pandemic and will be discussed during the session. It seeks to ensure that everyone in the Region has access to the quality essential medicines and vaccines they need, without suffering financial hardship, by 2030.

Polio eradication is also prominent on the agenda of the Regional Committee. The Eastern Mediterranean Region is now the only WHO region in which the disease remains endemic, following confirmation in August 2020 that wild poliovirus has been eradicated from the African Region. Representatives will discuss a proposal to establish a new Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks to galvanize efforts to end polio. Human resources and other assets from the regional polio eradication programme have been making a substantial contribution to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the programme has also experienced setbacks due to a decline in surveillance for poliovirus and a four-month pause in polio vaccination activities. Cases had already begun to rise again in the Region in recent years, and failure to eradicate polio in the remaining wild poliovirus transmission block comprising Afghanistan and Pakistan could result in international resurgence of the disease.

Additionally, the Regional Committee will discuss progress in scaling up family practice and engaging the private sector to advance universal health coverage, strengthening health laboratory services, and implementing the regional strategic framework for blood safety and availability.

The Regional Committee will consider a set of proposed resolutions covering the main health issues on the agenda, to guide the work of the Regional Office in collaboration with Member States over the coming year and beyond.

The work of WHO at the regional level is governed by the regional committees. The Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean convenes every year at the beginning of October and is attended by all countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region. During these annual sessions, Member States discuss and endorse regional policies, activities and financial plans.

[Sixty-seventh session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean](#)

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