

**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
Sixty-ninth Session
Cairo, Egypt, 10–13 October 2022**

October 2022

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH COVID-19

Objectives of the event

On 11 October 2022, a panel discussion on learning to live with COVID-19 will be held. The panel event will be a moderated discussion with four experts from the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

The objectives of the event are to open discussion on how to:

- sustain the response to end the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- adapt and integrate health systems to manage COVID-19 in the long term;
- ensure good quality care for those with “long COVID-19”; and
- operationalize lessons learned to prevent and prepare for future pandemics.

Background

As of 24 September 2022, there are 23 072 326 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 348 311 COVID-19 deaths reported in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Despite the incredible progress made in developing effective tools to prevent and control COVID-19, including vaccines and therapeutics, people continue to be infected in the Region, and countries experienced an upsurge of COVID-19 cases in early and mid-2022 due to the Omicron variant of concern (VOC) and its descendent lineages. As genomic sequencing and surveillance activities are enhanced, more countries are reporting the circulation of the Omicron VOC. To date, the detection of the Omicron VOC has been reported by 20 of the 22 countries and territories but it is likely to be circulating in all countries of the Region. Recent surges in COVID-19 cases can also be attributed to inconsistent adherence to, and lifting of, public health and social measures.

Future trends of the pandemic in the coming months will be shaped by the levels of population immunity resulting from natural infection and vaccination, as well as disease severity, access to health care, emergence of new VOCs, and implementation of and adherence to public health and social measures. Despite the emergence of new variants, vaccines remain an effective tool in preventing severe illness and death. WHO has therefore been supporting countries in the Region to enhance their vaccination campaigns, prioritizing high-risk groups. As of 26 September 2022, 46.1% of the Region’s population is fully vaccinated: 11 of the Region’s 22 (50%) countries and territories have achieved the 40% full vaccination target, while two countries (9%) have only fully vaccinated 10% or less of their populations. These countries face challenges such as limited high-level political commitment, insecurity, weak health systems, logistics issues, multiple competing health and non-health emergencies, and limited community engagement.

In the European Region, many countries have lifted all types of COVID-19 restrictions despite warnings from public health experts. Some of these countries want to reclassify COVID-19 as an endemic disease that poses no threat to society and advocate a new normal of “living with the virus”. WHO has warned that many countries in the world are still experiencing high numbers of cases and deaths, and advised governments to continue protecting people from infection and death by further scaling up vaccination and maintaining some level of public health and social measures. Decisions to lift all restrictions are not currently backed by scientific evidence. However, COVID-19 is unlikely to disappear in the long run and the world will have to learn how to live with it.

The Region has reached a turning point in the COVID-19 response: balancing the end of the acute phase of the pandemic with building resilience for health system strengthening and enhancing health

emergency preparedness, while limiting the negative impact on economies, societies and livelihoods. Learning to live with COVID-19 requires certain priority actions to be undertaken in the Region, including accelerating vaccine coverage with a focus on reaching the WHO target of 70% of the population of all countries fully vaccinated by mid-2022, especially given the huge disparities in vaccination rates between countries in the Region. Booster doses could be recommended for high-risk groups once a high proportion of the population has been fully vaccinated. Case management should be supported, including access to therapeutics, availability of medical oxygen and critical care capacity – prioritizing the most vulnerable people, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings. With an increasing number of people having previously been infected with COVID-19, research and clinical focus should also be given to the “post-COVID-19” condition, for those struggling with long-term symptoms.

Way forward

In 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on economies and health systems globally. With nine major ongoing humanitarian emergencies, the impact of the pandemic on Member States and populations in the Region was pronounced. Countries have had to adapt their health systems to ensure the continuity of essential health services alongside an adequate COVID-19 response. Now, a successful transition into the next stage of the COVID-19 response relies on resilient and strong health systems. This entails the fair and continued supply of services, therapeutics and diagnostics as well as equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines through well-established, efficient and effective delivery mechanisms. This, in turn, requires global and regional solidarity, for which the collaboration of Member States is needed.

Expected outcomes

- participants informed on sustaining the response to end the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- knowledge shared on how to adapt and strengthen health systems and to integrate the COVID-19 response into health systems to ensure good quality care for those with long COVID;
- lessons learned on how to prevent and prepare for future pandemics.