

WHO announces pandemic

12-03-2020

Today, as WHO/Europe's Standing Committee of the Regional Committee met, Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, briefed the group on the rapid escalation of COVID-19 in the WHO European Region, now placing it at the centre of this pandemic.

As of the morning of 12 March, there are more than 20 000 confirmed cases and there have been almost 1000 deaths in the European Region.

Dr Kluge stated that the number of cases is expected to increase further. He urged countries to continue to implement a containment strategy while accelerating their efforts to control the disease. Swift action is essential and each day can make a difference.

The meeting follows the announcement yesterday by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO's Director-General, that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic. This is due to the rapid increase in the number of cases outside China over the past 2 weeks that has affected a growing number of countries.

In his announcement, the Director-General underlined, "Let me be clear: describing this as a pandemic does not mean that countries should give up. The idea that countries should shift from containment to mitigation is wrong and dangerous."

Statement by Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe

"More and more countries are now experiencing clusters of cases or community transmission. We expect that in the days and weeks ahead, the number of cases and the number of deaths will continue to rise rapidly, and we must escalate our response in such a way as to take pre-emptive action wherever possible. Such actions may help to delay the pandemic, giving health-care systems time to prepare and assimilate the impact.

"As we have said many times recently, irrespective of the disease's trajectory in each country, there are several actions that can and need to be taken. There is no one-size-fits-all approach across the European Region. Describing the situation as a pandemic requires countries to accelerate their efforts, striking the right balance between protecting health, preventing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights. I appreciate that this means governmental authorities often face difficult decisions.

"Whilst every country is responsible for determining the nature and timing of measures introduced to prevent or slow down viral transmission, WHO/Europe considers that social distancing and quarantine measures need to be implemented in a timely and thorough manner. Some of the measures that countries may consider adopting are: closures of schools and universities, implementation of remote working policies, minimizing the use of public transport in peak hours and deferment of nonessential travel.

"COVID-19 impacts the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions most severely. In a spirit of solidarity, we all have to be ready to contribute our part to protect those people at highest risk. As individuals, practising

good hygiene and prevention measures as well as applying measures of social distancing, including avoiding crowded places, continue to be very important.

“Those who do not feel well should stay home and contact their health-care providers. Solidarity means that we must strictly abide by the regulations and procedures being put in place by health authorities in our countries.

“WHO/Europe continues to take an active role, working side by side with countries and regional partners in their efforts to prevent or mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on our people. We are present on the ground in Italy and are currently deploying missions to 12 countries, with 46 missions held already since February 2020.

“We have to humbly acknowledge that COVID-19 is a fast-evolving situation. We may not always have the best evidence at hand on which to base our decisions, but we do not have the luxury of time to wait until better evidence becomes available. I call on all countries to exchange country experiences and practices in a transparent and timely way. We can all benefit from evidence of measures that have been found to be effective.

“The information we are receiving from other regions is heartening. Taking the appropriate actions in a timely manner can affect the course of this pandemic. In the face of such an alarming situation that is exacting a heavy toll on our health-care services and vulnerable individuals, there can be no doubt that the time-honoured precautionary principle needs to guide our decisions. If we all pull together and recognize that this is the time to put health first, above all other considerations, we can overcome this difficult and challenging moment.

“I wish to salute all those brave and selfless health-care workers who are on the front line, seeking to prevent, contain and mitigate the effects of this pandemic and caring for those who are seriously ill. I thank you for the huge contribution you are making.

“WHO/Europe stands ready to continue to support countries and work alongside its partners to sustain the preparedness and response efforts.”

European guidance

The characterization of COVID-19 as a pandemic does not change WHO's risk assessment and recommendations, which stress that countries should adopt a mix of interventions based on an analysis of the local situation and context, with containment as a major pillar.

WHO/Europe, in line with global guidance, recommends that all countries increase their level of preparedness and strengthen alert and response systems to identify, manage and care for new cases of COVID-19 and communicate risks.

Countries should prepare to respond to different public health scenarios, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing cases and outbreaks of COVID-19. Each country should assess its risk, the measures in place and their social acceptability, and rapidly implement the necessary interventions at the appropriate scale to stop or slow down COVID-19 transmission while minimizing economic, public and social impacts.

For all countries, the final aim is the same: stop transmission and prevent the spread of the virus in order to save lives.

Advice for the public

WHO/Europe continues to encourage individuals to take care of their own health and protect others by:

- washing hands frequently with water and soap or using hand-sanitizing gel;
- maintaining social distancing (keeping a distance of 1 metre (3 feet) between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing);
- avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth;
- following respiratory hygiene (covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze, then disposing of the used tissue immediately);
- seeking medical care early if you have a fever, cough and difficulty breathing; and
- staying informed and following advice given by your health-care provider, national and local public health authority, or your employer on how to protect yourself and others from COVID-19.

WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 11 March 2020 (<https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>)

Critical preparedness, readiness and response actions for COVID-19 (<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/critical-preparedness-readiness-and-response-actions-for-covid-19>)

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>)

