

WHO launches new pandemic prevention plan, as COVID deaths fall 95 percent



Geneva, April 27 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization (WHO) has on launched a new initiative to help strengthen countries' ability to plan for, and deal with, another deadly pandemic like COVID-19, as latest figures show a huge fall in COVID deaths this year.

The guidance provides a joined-up approach for responding to the threat or arrival of any respiratory pathogen such as flu or the range of coronaviruses, that have the ability to rapidly mutate into different variants.

The new Preparedness and Resilience for Emerging Threats Initiative, or PRET, incorporates the latest tools and approaches for shared learning and collective action established during the COVID-19 pandemic, and other recent public health emergencies, said WHO.

In his regular weekly briefing in Geneva, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said that next week, the agency would launch its fourth Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP) issued by the UN health agency, since the first at the start of the COVID-19 emergency, in February 2020.

This update outlines how countries can “transition from an emergency response, to long-term, sustained management of COVID-19”, he said, over a two year period. “We’re very encouraged by the sustained decline in reported deaths from COVID-19, which have dropped 95 per cent since the beginning of this year.”

However, some countries are seeing increases, Tedros cautioned, and over the past four weeks, 14,000 people lost their lives to COVID. He said an estimated one in 10 infections now results in what’s commonly known as “long COVID,” suggesting that hundreds of millions of people will need longer-term care moving forward.

As the emergence of the new XBB.1.16 variant shows, the virus is still changing, and is still capable of causing new waves of disease and death, Tedros said. “We remain hopeful that sometime this year, we will be able to declare an end to COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern. But this virus is here to stay, and all countries will need to learn to manage it alongside other infectious diseases.”

The UN health chief joked that the acronym for the new PRET initiative, was deliberate: “prêt” means “ready” in French. “Rather than focusing on specific pathogens or diseases, PRET takes an integrated approach to pandemic planning, by focussing on groups of pathogens and the systems they affect.

“To begin with, PRET will focus on respiratory pathogens, including influenza, coronaviruses, RSV, and as-yet-unknown pathogens”, but he added that pandemics by definition, were global events, emphasizing the importance of international collaboration.

“But it’s also designed to promote collaboration between sectors. As COVID-19 demonstrated, a pandemic is not just a health crisis. It affects economies, education, trade, travel, food supply systems and more.”

PRET therefore, will engage as many sectors of human activity as possible, including civil society, religious groups and young people. He said PRET answers the call for technical guidance, and support for promoting and strengthening integrated preparedness and response, as outlined in World Health Assembly resolutions.

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