

## Like the rest of the world, the Region continues to be at risk

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As COVID-19 cases continue to increase in most countries of WHO South-East Asia Region, World Health Organization has called for stronger collective efforts by one and all to curtail the virus transmission; while also urging countries to plan for efficient roll out of COVID-19 vaccines as soon as they are available.

“Like the rest of the world, the Region continues to be at risk. To stop the spread of COVID-19 virus, we need to do it all - continued strong leadership; robust public health measures; clear communication and an engaged, empowered and enabled population - to turn the tide,” said Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region.

In a communication to the Member countries, the Regional Director said, the global race for COVID-19 vaccine has gathered momentum. In anticipation of development of a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine, countries should be prepared with an efficient and coordinated strategy and plan for roll-out of vaccination.

Vaccine availability is likely to be limited initially, hence will be important to clearly identify goals of national vaccination strategy, she said.

In the spirit of promoting fair and equitable access to the vaccines across all countries, WHO is proposing that countries prioritize at-risk population as they develop in-country vaccination strategies. Available vaccines should first be provided to priority populations and then expanded to others.

“The COVID-19 vaccination should aim at minimizing the societal and economic impact by reducing deaths caused by the disease,” Dr Khetrpal Singh said.

Listing out nine priority areas for COVID-19 vaccine introduction and roll out, the Regional Director said, a national level coordination committee would be needed to oversee vaccination; an expedited regulatory pathway for approval of new vaccine; a technical advisory group to recommend prioritization of risk

groups; protocols on infection prevention and control measures to minimize exposure during immunization sessions; training plans for vaccine introduction; and monitoring systems to measure coverage, acceptability and disease surveillance.

Countries would also need to strengthen vaccine cold chain systems; ensure trained staff perform vigilance activities for vaccine safety; and importantly, a vaccine demand generation plan to instill confidence and acceptance among people for the new vaccine.

Ensuring continued WHO support, the Regional Director said, "Together we must continue to strengthen the COVID-19 response by aggressively applying the basic public health measures, and also looking ahead and ensuring that we make full use of emerging tools to control spread, save lives and minimize impact."

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