Preparing countries for COVID-19 Vaccine Introduction

21 September 2020

While there are still unknowns about the vaccine products, there are immediate actions that countries can take to prepare for COVID-19 vaccines. This document provides a brief summary of pre-planning actions that all countries can begin working on immediately. These actions are highlighted in the COVID-19 Vaccine Introduction Readiness Assessment Tool (VIRAT) and are listed below.

Supporting countries to prepare for COVID-19 vaccine introduction: To prepare all countries for COVID-19 vaccine introduction, WHO, UNICEF, Gavi, and partners are working together at the global and regional levels to (1) develop and disseminate adaptable guidance, trainings, planning and monitoring tools, and advocacy materials and to (2) provide technical assistance and support to countries.

One of the initial resources developed is the COVID-19 VIRAT. This tool is intended to be used by Ministries of Health, with support from WHO and UNICEF Country Offices where relevant, to provide a roadmap for countries to plan for COVID-19 vaccine introduction and a structure framework for countries to self-monitor their readiness progress against key milestones.

This COVID-19 VIRAT is ready for immediate use by all countries. It may be slightly updated as more information becomes available on the vaccine(s) and timelines for delivery.

Using lessons learned from past vaccine introduction experiences, countries can begin pre-planning for COVID-19 vaccines by conducting the following activities as soon as possible:

1. **Planning and coordination:**

→ Establish (or engage an existing committee) a National Coordinating Committee (NCC) for COVID-19 vaccine introduction with terms of reference, roles and responsibilities and regular meetings.

→ Establish (or engage an existing working group) a National Technical Working Group (NTWG) for COVID-19 vaccine introduction with terms of reference, roles and responsibilities and regular meetings

2. **Regulatory:**

→ Confirm to WHO the existence of any expedited regulatory pathway for approval of COVID-19 vaccines (i.e. emergency use authorization, exceptional approval/waiver mechanism based on reliance/recognition, abbreviated procedure, fast track, etc.). Timelines and maximum number of days should be mentioned (expected timeline: maximum 15 working days).

3. **Prioritizing, Targeting and COVID-19 Surveillance:**

→ Monitor progress of NITAG working groups on COVID-19 vaccines and interim recommendations focusing on prioritization and risk groups.

4. **Service Delivery:**

→ Update protocols for infection prevention and control measures including adequate personal protection equipment (PPE) to minimize exposure risk during immunization sessions.

5. **Training and Supervision:**

→ Develop a training plan to prepare for COVID-19 vaccine introduction that includes key groups of participants, content topic areas, key training partners and training methods (in-person or virtual). WHO will provide a template for guidance.

6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:**

→ Develop or adapt existing surveillance and monitoring framework with a set of recommended indicators (coverage, acceptability, disease surveillance etc…) for COVID-19 vaccine. Determine whether registration and reporting will be individual or aggregate, and to what extent existing tools and systems can be re-used.

7. **Vaccine Cold Chain and Logistics:**

→ Establish/strengthen the national logistics working group with appropriate terms of reference and standard operating procedures to coordinate COVID-19 vaccines and ancillary products deployment.

8. **Safety Surveillance:**

→ Ensure that guidelines, documented procedures and tools for planning and conducting vaccine pharmacovigilance activities (i.e. AEFI reporting, investigation, causality assessment, risk communication and response) are available.

→ Assure competent and trained staff to perform vigilance activities.

→ Expedite training the AEFI committee to review COVID-19 Vaccine safety data (e.g., causality assessment of serious AEFI, clusters of AEFI, emerging safety concerns etc).

→ Identify provisions that require manufacturers to implement risk management plans and collect and report COVID-19 vaccine safety data to the NRA.

→ Plan active surveillance of specific COVID-19 vaccine related adverse events. If this is not possible, develop provisions that allow reliance on active surveillance data, decisions, and information from other countries or regional or international bodies.

9. **Demand Generation and Communication:**

→ Design a demand plan (includes advocacy, communications, social mobilization, risk and safety comms, community engagement, and training) to generate confidence, acceptance and demand for COVID-19 vaccines. Must include a crisis communications preparedness planning.

For information on COVID-19 vaccine development and access, the following references are available:

COVID-19 Vaccine Research and Development: The Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator is a global collaboration accelerating the development, production, and equitable access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, treatments, and tests. Countries can see progress updates on vaccine research and development here.

COVID-19 Vaccine Access: Countries can sign up to receive COVID-19 vaccines through the ACT Accelerator's COVID-19 Vaccine (COVAX) Facility.

WHO reference number: WHO/2019-nCoV/Vaccine_introduction/2020.1

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