

WHO policy brief: Reaching COVID-19 vaccination targets

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Key points

- The World Health Organization's most recent Global Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy (1) sets for the essential actions Member States should consider following to reach COVID-19 vaccination targets.
- Vaccines should be deployed to high priority groups in settings where coverage (including boosters) is incomplete.
- Countries are advised to invest in research and development of vaccine products with improved attributes.
- Encourage equitable distribution and early availability of vaccine products with improved attributes for all countries through manufacturing agreements.
- Investigate the opportunity to develop delivery approaches for vaccination of adults.
- Strengthen health information systems to adequately monitor the progression of potential health emergencies and inform the timing and targets for policy decisions.
- Ensure the sustainability of the COVID-19 vaccination effort beyond 2022.

Introduction

More than 2.5 years since the first COVID-19 cases were reported, the pandemic remains an acute global emergency. At the present time, there continue to be millions of people infected each week with SARS-CoV-2, and in the first eight months of 2022, more than one million people were reported to have died from COVID-19 ([WHO COVID-19 Dashboard](#)). With access to and appropriate use of existing life-saving tools, COVID-19 can become a manageable disease with significantly reduced morbidity and mortality. Lives and livelihoods can be saved, but there is still work to be done.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes the challenges countries face for maintaining their COVID-19 response while addressing competing public health challenges, conflicts, climate change and economic crises. WHO continues to support countries in adjusting COVID-19 strategies to reflect successes to date and leverage what has been learned through national responses.

To assist national and global efforts to end the COVID-19 emergency worldwide, WHO updated the COVID-19 ([Global Preparedness, Readiness and Response plan](#)) in 2022 and outlined two strategic objectives. First, reduce the circulation of SARS-CoV-2 by protecting individuals, especially vulnerable individuals at risk of severe disease or occupational exposure to the virus. This action will reduce pressure on the virus to evolve and the probability that future variants will emerge and will reduce the burden on health systems. Second, prevent, diagnose and treat COVID-19 to reduce mortality, morbidity and long-term sequelae. WHO's plan further looks ahead to research, development and equitable access to effective countermeasures and essential supplies.

Recognizing that countries are in different situations with regards to COVID-19 due to a number of factors including differences in population level immunity; public trust; access to and use of COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics, vaccines, personal protective equipment; and challenges from other health/non-health emergencies, WHO has produced a package of six short policy briefs. These briefs aim to help countries update policies to focus on critical aspects of managing the acute and long-term threats of COVID-19 while consolidating the foundation for a stronger public health infrastructure ([Strengthening the Global Architecture for Health Emergency Preparedness, Response and Resilience](#)).

The policy briefs outline essential actions that national and sub-national policy makers can implement for the following: COVID-19 testing, clinical management of COVID-19, reaching COVID-19 vaccination targets, maintaining infection prevention and control measures for COVID-19 in health care facilities, building trust through risk communication and community engagement and managing the COVID-19 infodemic. This policy brief focus on reaching COVID-19 vaccination targets ([Link to the six policy briefs](#)).

Purpose of this document

This and the other five COVID-19 policy briefs are aimed at all national and sub-national policy makers in health and other ministries; and provides a brief overview of the key actions advised to Member States based on recommendations published in WHO COVID-19 technical guidance. It also articulates the need for sustained financing and a trained, protected and respected workforce to maintain these life-saving actions in the context of competing health and non-health emergencies. It additionally recognizes the need to strengthen the acute and longer-term response for COVID-19 while in relation to other pressing public health issues.

Essential actions for Member States to consider in updating COVID-19 policies

1. Invest in rapid deployment of vaccines to higher-priority groups

The Global Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy lays out a primary goal to ‘Sustain and enhance momentum to reduce mortality and morbidity, protect the health systems, and resume socio-economic activities with existing vaccines (1). To achieve this goal, it is critical to leverage currently authorized vaccines to vaccinate the population according to the WHO SAGE Roadmap (2).

The highest- and high-priority groups should be vaccinated first. The highest-priority groups for COVID-19 vaccination include older adults, health workers and immunocompromised persons. The high-priority group consists of adults with co-morbidities, pregnant persons, teachers and other essential workers and disadvantaged sociodemographic subpopulations at higher risk of severe COVID-19. These groups should be urgently vaccinated using effective vaccination schedules, including boosters, as recommended by national policy. Countries may have different abilities to reach these populations but should strive to reach an aspirational coverage of 100% to reduce deaths and suffering, keep the health system in check and ensure sustainable socio-economic activity.

Vaccination of this group should be followed by medium-priority groups, which include remaining adults and children and adolescents with comorbidities. Countries should also consider providing the opportunity to further extend vaccination to the broader population. The lowest priority group consists of children and adolescents.

Several initiatives may be considered for investments by national and sub-national policy makers.

Demand generation. The objective is to understand barriers and drivers to vaccine uptake based on local behavioural and societal data. A range of strategies may be needed and include engagement with community representatives to guide planning, design of tailored service delivery strategies and targeted communications to fill information gaps and support informed decisions.

Targeted immunization campaigns. The aim is to achieve mass vaccination of older adults, health workers and other priority groups who often are not adequately served through general population campaigns.

Renewed and modified approaches to humanitarian responses. Here it may be important to engage with essential partners to reach displaced peoples.

2. Invest in research and development of vaccine products

The WHO Global Covid-19 Vaccination Strategy sets forth another goal: to accelerate development and access to improved vaccines to achieve durable, broadly protective immunity and reduce transmission (1). National and sub-national policy makers should consider increasing financial and technical investment in fundamental innovation towards achieving more durable, broadly protective and transmission-reducing vaccines with prospects for improved delivery. WHO provides guidance for vaccine development through updated target product profiles and vaccine composition recommendations (3,4,5).

Substantially reducing SARS-CoV-2 transmission will help manage risks associated with the emergence of new variants of concern and diminish the likelihood of repeated large global waves of disease resulting from immune escape.

3. Seek early availability of vaccine products with improved attributes for all countries through manufacturing agreements.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, WHO has striven for early availability of vaccine products for all countries with the aim of achieving a coordinated and equitable approach to disease control. This quest was initially elusive, and there was sub-optimal access to vaccine supply for lower-income settings until early 2022.

Moving forward, as vaccines with improved attributes are developed, national and sub-national policy makers are encouraged to ensure equitable access to these new and improved products through manufacturing and access agreements targeting the early availability of vaccine products with improved attributes. These arrangements should be arranged by all countries in alignment with WHO recommendations. National and sub-national policy makers are encouraged to explore regional collaboration agreements to create greater manufacturing autonomy.

4. Investigate the opportunity to develop delivery approaches for the vaccination of adults.

To reach high coverage of highest and high risk groups, including without taking away resources from other immunization and primary care services, countries need to consider the development and integration of COVID-19 vaccination delivery approaches (i.e., platforms) across the life course. This is a

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