

WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 20 March 2020

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening, wherever you are.

Every day, COVID-19 seems to reach a new and tragic milestone.

More than 210,000 cases have now been reported to WHO, and more than 9,000 people have lost their lives.

Every loss of life is a tragedy. It's also motivation to double down and do everything we can to stop transmission and save lives.

We also need to celebrate our successes. Yesterday, Wuhan reported no new cases for the first time since the outbreak started.

Wuhan provides hope for the rest of the world, that even the most severe situation can be turned around.

Of course, we must exercise caution – the situation can reverse. But the experience of cities and countries that have pushed back this virus give hope and courage to the rest of the world.

Every day, we are learning more about this virus and the disease it causes.

One of the things we are learning is that although older people are the hardest hit, younger people are not spared.

Data from many countries clearly show that people under 50 make up a significant proportion of patients requiring hospitalization.

Today, I have a message for young people: you are not invincible. This virus could put you in hospital for weeks, or even kill you.

Even if you don't get sick, the choices you make about where you go could be the difference between life and death for someone else.

I'm grateful that so many young people are spreading the word and not the virus.

As I keep saying, solidarity is the key to defeating COVID-19 - solidarity between countries, but also between age groups.

Thank you for heeding our call for solidarity, solidarity, solidarity.

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We've said from the beginning that our greatest concern is the impact this virus could have if it gains a foothold in countries with weaker health systems, or with vulnerable populations.

That concern has now become very real and urgent.

We know that if this disease takes hold in these countries, there could be significant sickness and loss of life.

But that is not inevitable. Unlike any pandemic in history, we have the power to change the way this goes.

WHO is working actively to support all countries, and especially those that need our support the most.

As you know, the collapse of the market for personal protective equipment has created extreme difficulties in ensuring health workers have access to the equipment they need to do their jobs safely and effectively.

This is an area of key concern for us.

We have now identified some producers in China who have agreed to supply WHO.

We're currently finalizing the arrangements and coordinating shipments so we can refill our warehouse to ship PPE to whoever needs it most.

Our aim is to build a pipeline to ensure continuity of supply, with support from our partners, governments and the private sector. I am grateful to Jack Ma and his foundation as well as Aliko Dangote for their willingness to help provide essential supplies to countries in need.

To support our call to test every suspected case, we are also working hard to increase the global supply of diagnostic tests.

There are many companies globally that produce diagnostic kits, but WHO can only buy or recommend kits that have been evaluated independently, to ensure their quality.

So we have worked with FIND – the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics – to contract additional labs to evaluate new diagnostics.

In parallel, we're working with companies to secure the supply and equitable distribution of these tests.

And we're also working with companies to increase production of the other products needed to perform the tests, from the swabs used to take samples to the large machines needed to process them.

We're very grateful for the way the private sector has stepped up to lend its support to the global response.

Just in the past few days I've spoken with the International Chamber of Commerce, with many CEOs through the World Economic Forum, and with the "B20" group of business leaders from the G20 countries.

We understand the heavy financial toll this pandemic is taking on businesses and the global economy.

We're encouraged by the solidarity and generosity of business leaders to use their resources, experience and networks to improve the availability of supplies, communicate reliable information and protect their staff and customers.

And we're also encouraged that countries around the world continue to support the global response. We thank Kuwait for its contribution of 40 million U.S. dollars.

In addition to increasing access to masks, gloves, gowns and tests, we're also increasing access to the evidence-based technical guidance countries and health workers need to save lives.

WHO has published guidelines for health ministers, health system administrators, and other decision-makers, to help them provide life-saving treatment as health systems are challenged, without compromising the safety of health workers.

The guidelines detail actions all countries can take to provide care for patients, regardless of how many cases they have. They also outline specific actions to prepare health systems, according to each of the "4 Cs" – no cases, sporadic cases, clusters of cases, and community transmission.

These guidelines provide a wealth of practical information on screening and triage, referral, staff, supplies, standard of care, community engagement and more.

We encourage all countries to use these and the many other guidelines, which are all available on the WHO website.

But we're not only advising countries. We also have advice for individuals around the world, especially those who are now adjusting to a new reality.

We know that for many people, life is changing dramatically.

My family is no different – my daughter is now taking her classes online from home because her school is closed.

During this difficult time, it's important to continue looking after your physical and mental health. This will not only help you in the long-term, it will also help you fight COVID-19 if you get it.

First, eat a health and nutritious diet, which helps your immune system to function properly.

Second, limit your alcohol consumption, and avoid sugary drinks.

Third, don't smoke. Smoking can increase your risk of developing severe disease if you become infected with COVID-19.

Fourth, exercise. WHO recommends 30 minutes of physical activity a day for adults, and one hour a day for children.

If your local or national guidelines allow it, go outside for a walk, a run or a ride, and keep a safe distance from others. If you can't leave the house, find an exercise video online, dance to music, do some yoga, or walk up and down the stairs.

If you're working at home, make sure you don't sit in the same position for long periods. Get up and take a 3-minute break every 30 minutes.

We will be providing more advice on how to stay healthy at home in the coming days and weeks.

Fifth, look after your mental health. It's normal to feel stressed, confused and scared during a crisis. Talking to people you know and trust can help.

Supporting other people in your community can help you as much as it does them. Check in on neighbours, family and friends. Compassion is a medicine.

Listen to music, read a book or play a game.

And try not to read or watch too much news if it makes you anxious. Get your information from reliable sources once or twice a day.

To increase access to reliable information, WHO has worked with WhatsApp and Facebook to launch a new WHO Health Alert messaging service.

This service will provide the latest news and information on COVID-19, including details on symptoms and how to protect yourself.

The Health Alert service is now available in English and will be introduced in other languages next week.

To access it, send the word "hi" to the following number on WhatsApp: +41 798 931 892. We will make this information available on our website later today.

COVID-19 is taking so much from us. But it's also giving us something special – the opportunity to come together as one humanity – to work together, to learn together, to grow together.

I thank you.