

Corona Pandemic: WHO rallies scientists in the search for a vaccine

The spread of the novel Coronavirus is affecting more and more parts of the globe. The World Health Organisation (WHO) seeks to support countries with weaker health systems and support scientists to find a vaccine.

Since the end of 2019, when in China the first cases of a pulmonary disease with unknown causes were detected, infections with the novel Corona virus have been spreading around the world.

The corona virus belongs to a group of viruses that are found in both humans and animals. It triggers symptoms ranging from normal cold to severe pulmonary conditions that can be fatal. The new coronavirus is a distinct virus but belongs to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-Cov).

Global Emergency and Pandemic

At the end of January, the [WHO](#), the United Nations' specialised organisation tasked with global public health, has declared the outbreak an international public health emergency (PHEIC), then on March 11 as a global pandemic. A formal declaration of a PHEIC can be made following "an extraordinary event which is determined to constitute a public health risk to other States through the international spread of disease and to potentially require a coordinated international response".

An ever-growing number of countries has declared travel restrictions. However, the WHO has been cautious about this topic. "Under [international health regulations](#), countries are obliged to justify their emergency restrictions with the WHO", writes [The New Humanitarian](#). In an interview on 20 March, [Dr. David Nabarro](#), a Special Envoy of the General-Director of WHO on COVID-19, [pointed out](#) that travel bans are of subordinate importance. First should come public information and communication, insuring preparedness of health and medical institutions, and the identification and containment of infected cases.

Efforts to assist governments

The WHO is specifically concerned to support countries with weaker health systems, a task that is getting more pressing as the virus spreads globally. The organisation is working diligently to [support all countries](#). To this end, it has launched a 675-million-dollar plan. "We know that if this disease takes hold in these countries, there could be significant sickness and loss of life." said the WHO's Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on 20, March 2020.

The collapse of the market for personal protective equipment is one crucial challenge countries are currently facing. The WHO is working hard to alleviate the situation and has identified producers for medical equipment. For its global pandemic response, the WHO is receiving additional financial aid from several countries. For example, [Kuwait contributed](#) an extra 40 million U.S. dollars recently.

The World Health Organization plays an important role in global health and disease governance, owing to its key role of developing, monitoring and implementing

international norms and standards. These include regulatory standards for vaccines, essential medicines and health products, as well as organizing multiple actors towards common objectives. Accordingly, the WHO is playing a key part in global research and innovation action in response to coronavirus. "Harnessing the power of science is critical for bringing this outbreak under control," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Strategies of communication

Already at the end of February, the [WHO organised a forum](#) in collaboration with Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness. The forum brought together scientists, health ministers, research funders, and agencies, joining forces around topics of COVID-19, research on public health, diagnostics as well as the development of medicines and different kinds of tests and therapies.

Researchers are building on existing SARS and MERS research, but are still struggling to fill the gaps, Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, the WHO Chief Scientist said. "Understanding the disease, its reservoirs, transmission and clinical severity and then developing effective counter-measures is critical for the control of the outbreak, to reduce deaths and minimize the economic impact." These measures address for example an increase in the effectiveness of tests, medicines, vaccines, as well as an affordable mechanism to reach and help vulnerable populations.

As it is critical to inform and reach people as widely as possible, the WHO has also collaborated with major global social networks Facebook and WhatsApp. Together, they have launched the WHO Health alert messaging service to deliver reliable information on COVID-19 accessible for everyone. According to Will Cathcart, who runs WHO WhatsApp alert, "we already have over one million people signed up".

Finding a vaccine

When Chinese authorities detected the Coronavirus in January, the R & D Blueprint was activated as part of the WHO's a response. R&D (Research and Development), Blueprint, for which the WHO acts as a coordinator, is a global strategy plan enabling R&D programs to be triggered rapidly during epidemics. Its main objective is to track the availability of tests, vaccines, and medicines globally. Previous uses of R&D Blueprints have been for diseases such as Ebola, Lassa Fever, or MERS-Cov.

In the meantime, the first rounds of vaccination trials have begun. The trial began "just 60 days after the genetic sequence of the virus was shared by China", the WHO's head Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on 18. March 2020. However, it could take 12 to 18 months for a vaccination to be widely accessible.

David Nabarro, the WHO's Special Envoy, believes that the crisis can be handled if adequate measures are effectively put in place. But he also [stated](#) that "it will take the world much longer to suppress the Coronavirus pandemic if nations continue to work independently and are inconsistent in their application of WHO guidance."

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