

'Chronic' global shortage of virus protective gear 'urgent threat': WHO

March 27 2020



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The dire lack of protective gear for health workers is proving an dire threat to attempts to beat back the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization warned Friday.

The WHO urged industrial powerhouse countries to ramp up production of personal protective equipment (PPE) as the global body warned that the battle against the new [coronavirus](#) was only just beginning.

"The chronic global shortage of personal protective equipment is now one of the most urgent threats to our collective ability to save lives," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual news conference in Geneva.

"When health workers are at risk, we're all at risk," he said.

"This problem can only be solved with international cooperation and solidarity," said Tedros, adding that [health workers](#) in [poorer countries](#) deserved the same protection as those in wealthier states.

Tedros said the WHO had shipped almost two million individual PPE items to 74 countries and was preparing to send a similar amount to a further 60 nations.

He said he had urged the G20 countries to use their "industrial might and innovation" to produce and distribute the tools needed to save more lives.

"We must also make a promise to future generations, saying: 'never again'," Tedros added.

"Viral outbreaks are a fact of life. How much damage they do is something we can influence," he said.

The new coronavirus pandemic has killed more than 25,000 people, with Europe accounting for most of the deaths, according to an AFP tally based on official statistics.

Around 550,000 cases have been registered around the world since the outbreak began in China late last year.

Tedros said that more than 100,000 people had now had the virus and

recovered.

He added: "We're only at the beginning of this fight. We need to stay calm, stay united and work together."

Treatment trials

Mindful that a safe, properly-tested, preventative vaccine remained at least 12 to 18 months away, Tedros said that in the meantime, trials were under way to find therapeutics that could help treat those already suffering from the virus.

He said that in Norway and Spain, the first patients were about to enrol in the WHO's so-called solidarity trial, which will compare the safety and effectiveness of four different drugs or drug combinations.

More than 45 countries are taking part in trial and the more that join, "the faster we will have results", said Tedros.

AFP tallies showed a total of 300,000 cases have now been recorded in Europe, as the United States overtook China and Italy as the country with the most infections.

WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan stressed that countries should not be punished for racking up large numbers of confirmed cases, creating "perverse disincentives" for broader testing.

Instead, he said, they should be rewarded for rigorous testing of suspect cases.

"Part of that rise in numbers is increased detection due to better testing," he said.

Ryan stressed that "no-one can predict" how long the pandemic was going to last.

Tedros said 12 million people had signed up to the WHO's English-language health alerts on the WhatsApp messaging service, while the Arabic, French and Spanish versions launched on Friday.

He said Chinese, Hindi, Russian and Swahili versions would follow shortly, among other languages.

Meanwhile Tedros said there had been increasing cyber-attacks targeting the WHO and scams using its name and his.

"Crises like this bring out the best and worst in humanity," he said.

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Citation: 'Chronic' global shortage of virus protective gear 'urgent threat': WHO (2020, March 27) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-chronic-global-shortage-virus-gear.html>

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