

Pandemic antibiotics surge will cause more deaths: WHO

June 2 2020, by Robin Millard



The UN health agency says it is concerned about the inappropriate use of antibiotics during the coronavirus crisis

Increased antibiotics use in combating the COVID-19 pandemic will strengthen bacterial resistance and ultimately lead to more deaths during

the crisis and beyond, the World Health Organization said Monday.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said a "worrying number" of bacterial infections were becoming increasingly resistant to the medicines traditionally used to treat them.

The UN health agency said it was concerned that the inappropriate use of antibiotics during the coronavirus crisis would further fuel the trend.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increased use of antibiotics, which ultimately will lead to higher [bacterial resistance](#) rates that will impact the burden of disease and deaths during the pandemic and beyond," Tedros told a virtual press conference from the WHO's Geneva headquarters.

The WHO said only a small proportion of COVID-19 patients needed antibiotics to treat subsequent bacterial infections.

The organisation has issued guidance to medics not to provide antibiotic therapy or prophylaxis to patients with mild COVID-19, or to patients with moderate illness without a clinical suspicion of bacterial infection.

Tedros said the guidelines said should help tackle antimicrobial resistance while saving lives.

He called the threat of antimicrobial resistance "one of the most urgent challenges of our time".

"It's clear that the world is losing its ability to use critically important antimicrobial medicines," he said.

Highlighting inappropriate usage, he said there was an "overuse" of antibiotics in some countries, while in low-income states, such life-

saving medicines were unavailable, "leading to needless suffering and death".

Disease treatment disrupted

Meanwhile the WHO said the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) had been severely disrupted since the COVID-19 pandemic began in December, following a survey of 155 countries.

"This situation is of significant concern because people living with NCDs are at higher risk of severe COVID-19-related illness and death," it said.

The survey, during a three-week period in May, found that low-income countries were most affected.

Some 53 percent of countries reported partially or completely disrupted services for hypertension treatment.

The figure was 49 percent for diabetes treatment and related complications; 42 percent for cancer treatment, and 31 percent for cardiovascular emergencies.

The most common reasons for discontinuing or reducing services were cancellations of planned treatments, a decrease in available public transport and a lack of staff because health workers had been reassigned to COVID-19 treatment.

Mass gatherings risk

The WHO warned about the dangers of mass gatherings, as protests rage

in the United States and elsewhere over the killing of unarmed black man George Floyd, and as [sports events](#) begin a tentative resumption.

"Mass gatherings have the potential to act as super-spreading events," warned Tedros, highlighting WHO guidance designed to help organisers determine how such events can be held safely.

The WHO was asked about the street protests in the United States and the fear that they could increase the spread of the virus.

"With increasing social mixing and people coming together, particularly in areas if the virus is not under control, that close contact between people can pose a risk," answered the organisation's COVID-19 technical lead Maria Van Kerkhove—stressing that she was speaking about mass gatherings in general.

People planning mass events should undertake a "very serious, rigorous risk assessment", she said.

"Physical distancing remains a very important aspect to control and suppression of transmission of COVID-19. This is not over yet," the expert said.

S.America yet to peak

The novel coronavirus has infected at least 6.2 million people and killed more than 373,000 since the outbreak first emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP.

WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said that infection rates in South America were "far from stable" following a rapid increase in cases.

Brazil, Peru, Chile and Mexico were among the 10 reporting the highest new number of cases in the past 24 hours.

"Central and South America in particular have very much become the intense zones for transmission of this virus," Ryan said.

"I don't believe we have reached the peak in that transmission and, at this point, I cannot predict when we will."

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