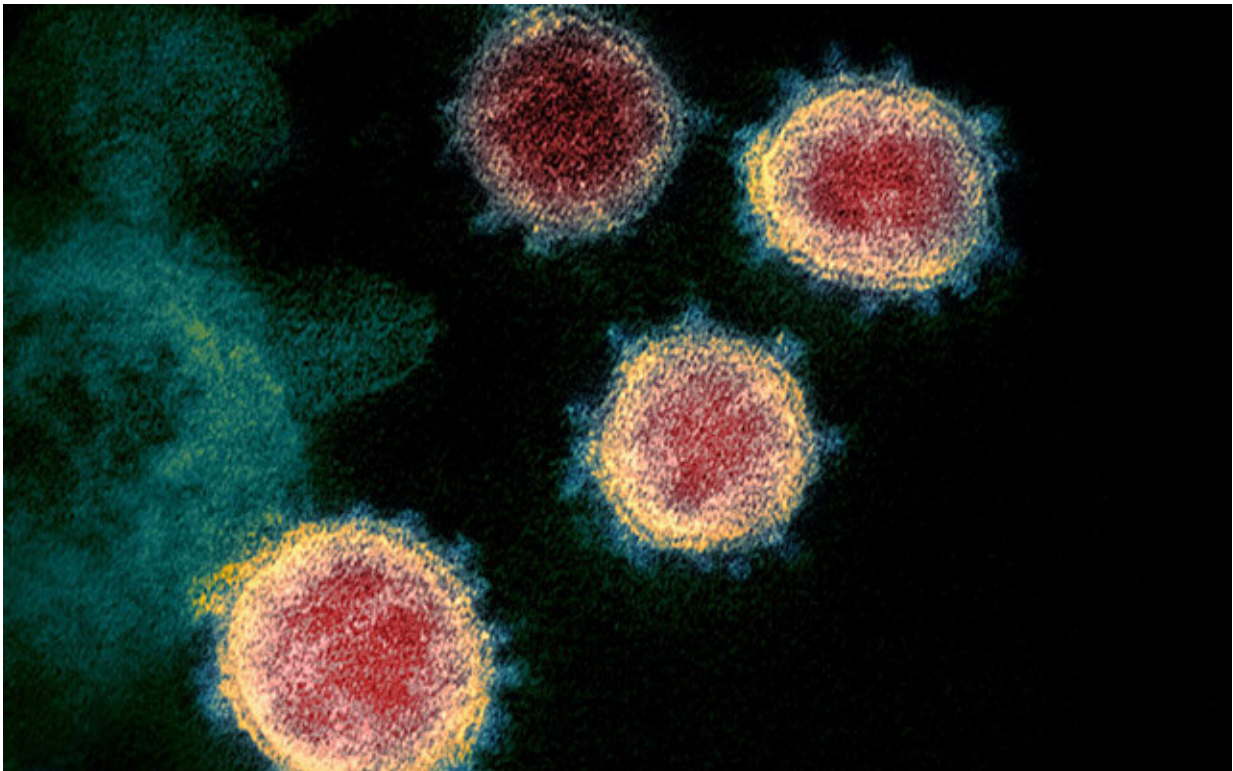


School closures still 'last resort' despite variants: WHO

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A colorized scanning electron micrograph of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Credit: NIAID

Schools should only close as a last resort while research is under way into whether the new coronavirus variants affect children differently, the World Health Organization said Wednesday.

The debate on shutting schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has been revived by the emergence of more contagious virus mutations.

The WHO said research had begun looking at the factors that may put children at risk, the long-term health effects on those infected, and the impact of new variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19 disease.

"The arrival in late 2020 of new more transmissible variants of SARS-CoV-2 requires additional analysis by sex and age to measure how and if the new variants impact children differently," it said.

"If it is found that children are more affected, public health social measures may need to be adapted."

Here is a summary of the WHO's special focus on COVID-19's impact on children and schools, issued Wednesday:

WHO's conclusions

- "School closure should be implemented as a last resort, be temporary and only at a local level in areas with intense transmission."—Authorities should check for new guidance, "particularly with respect to the appearance of new and possibly more transmissible variants".
- In low-transmission areas, schools are unlikely to drive infection; in areas with widespread transmission, protective measures in schools are essential.
- Schools need outbreak prevention and management plans, including on ventilation, hand and surface cleaning, communication with parents, mask use and physical distancing.

- Children aged 12 and older "should wear a mask under the same conditions as adults". Physical distancing can be achieved by limiting [class sizes](#), alternating shifts and limiting mixing of classes.
- Stronger prevention measures might be necessary in [secondary schools](#), and adolescents should limit their exposure risk outside [school](#).
- Teachers "are more likely to be infected" outside schools than inside.
- During school closures, remote learning should be set up, regular schools services such as meals and immunisation should be maintained, while mental health support should be enhanced.

Data and 2020 findings

- Under-18s represent 29 percent of the global population but only eight percent of reported cases last year.
- They are more likely to have mild or asymptomatic infection and under-20s accounted for only 0.2 percent of COVID-19 deaths.
- Studies suggest that among children, under-10s are less susceptible and less infectious. Adolescents aged 16-18 transmit the virus as often as adults.
- "The longer vulnerable children are out of school, the less likely they are to return," said the WHO.
- School closures have a negative impact on [children](#) besides their education, including their physical and mental health.

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