

Europe vaccine rollout 'unacceptably slow': WHO

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The World Health Organization on Thursday slammed Europe's vaccine rollout as "unacceptably slow" and said it was prolonging the pandemic as the region sees a "worrying" surge in coronavirus infections.

"Vaccines present our best way out of this pandemic... However, the rollout of these vaccines is unacceptably slow," WHO director for

Europe Hans Kluge said in a statement.

"We must speed up the process by ramping up manufacturing, reducing barriers to administering vaccines, and using every single vial we have in stock, now," he said.

To date, only 10 percent of the region's total population have received one vaccine dose, and four percent have completed a full vaccine series, the organisation said.

The WHO's European region comprises 53 countries and territories and includes Russia and several Central Asian nations.

As of Thursday, more than 152 million doses have been injected in the WHO European region, representing 25.5 percent of doses administered worldwide, according to AFP's database.

The WHO European region is home to 12 percent of the world's population.

On average, 0.31 percent of the population in the European region receives a dose every day. While this rate is almost double the global rate of 0.18 percent, it is far below that of the US and Canada, which tops the chart at 0.82 percent.

The WHO said Europe's slow rollout was "prolonging the pandemic" and described Europe's virus situation as "more worrying than we have seen in several months."

Five weeks ago, the weekly number of new cases in Europe had dipped to under one million, but "last week saw increasing transmission of Covid-19 in the majority of countries in the WHO European region, with 1.6 million new cases," it said.

The total number of deaths in Europe "is fast approaching one million and the total number of cases about to surpass 45 million," it said, noting that Europe was the second-most affected region after the Americas.

Worrying new variants

The UN body warned that the rapid spread of the virus could increase the risk of the emergence of worrying new variants.

"The likelihood of new variants of concern occurring increases with the rate at which the virus is replicating and spreading, so curbing transmission through basic disease control actions is crucial," Dorit Nitzan, WHO Europe's regional emergency director, said in the statement.

New infections were increasing in every age group except in people aged 80 and older, as vaccinations of that age group begin to show effect.

The WHO said the British variant of the virus was now the predominant one in Europe, and was present in 50 countries.

"As this variant is more transmissible and can increase the risk of hospitalisation, it has a greater public health impact and additional actions are required to control it," it said.

Those actions included expanded testing, isolation, contact tracing, quarantine and genetic sequencing.

Meanwhile, the WHO said lockdowns "should be avoided by timely and targeted public health interventions", but should be used when the disease "overstretches the ability of health services to care for patients adequately."

It said 27 countries in its European region were in partial or full nationwide lockdown, with 21 imposing nighttime curfews.

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