

WHO says 'not a time to relax' on COVID, flu

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As winter approaches, the World Health Organization on Monday stressed the importance of staying vigilant as cases of COVID and influenza rise in Europe, encouraging more people to get vaccinated.

"This is not a time to relax," WHO Europe director Hans Kluge told a press conference.

The 53 countries that make up the WHO Europe region, which includes Russia and countries in Central Asia, were once again at the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, accounting for nearly 60 percent of new COVID cases worldwide, Kluge said.

At the same time, cases of the seasonal influenza are peaking.

With this new wave of COVID, deaths and admissions to [intensive care](#) are not increasing to the same degree as earlier waves, and the WHO stressed the link to vaccination campaigns.

"Vaccination remains one of our most effective tools against both flu and COVID-19," Kluge said, urging those eligible to get jabs for both the influenza and booster shot for COVID-19 as soon as possible.

On Monday, the WHO also marked World Polio day, a disease which affects mostly the very young and causes paralysis, and has been virtually wiped out in the western world.

A mutated variant of the polio virus derived from oral polio vaccines has however recently been detected in the UK, Ukraine, Israel and the US.

Less virulent than the natural virus, this variant can nevertheless cause [severe symptoms](#), such as limb paralysis in unvaccinated patients.

While rare, the variant has become more common in recent years due to low vaccination rates in some communities.

"I think it's important that we understand that anywhere in the globe if we left people behind, the polio virus is a very good barometer to tell us who are they," WHO Europe expert Siddhartha Datta told reporters.

Datta explained that regardless of the region, the populations affected

were those "underserved," meaning that they for different reasons had not received enough vaccines to reach the 95 percent coverage target

No cases of the natural polio [virus](#) have been reported in Europe for more than 20 years.

"This is not something we can take for granted," Kluge said.

In the region as a whole, coverage with the third dose of the polio vaccine fell by one percent between 2019 and 2020. By 2021, only 25 of the 53 countries had achieved 95 percent [polio](#) vaccine coverage.

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