WHO Declares Novel Coronavirus Outbreak a Pandemic. Now What?

Four key ways countries can prevent infections, save lives and minimize impact

March 11, 2020 By Trent Straube

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic. This means the virus that causes COVID-19 disease is likely to continue to spread across the globe, resulting in more illness and death.

“In the past two weeks, the number of cases of COVID-19 outside China has increased 13-fold, and the number of affected countries has tripled,” said WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom in a media briefing Wednesday, March 11. “There are now more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries, and 4,291 people have lost their lives. Thousands more are fighting for their lives in hospitals.”

> The WHO has declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. https://t.co/YC0hxIt6G2 pic.twitter.com/dNtYrOGOyX
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> — CBC News: The National (@CBCTheNational) March 11, 2020

Tedros stressed that defining the situation as a pandemic doesn’t change what WHO and countries are doing to battle the outbreak and that it isn’t meant to spark fear or diminish efforts to fight the disease, which is caused by a novel coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2.

In the United States, about 1,000 people have been diagnosed with the disease, and 29 have died, according to STAT News, but the full extent is unknown because testing has not been widely accessible.

The full transcript of Tedros’s speech is available here, but below is an edited excerpt:

> “WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock, and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction.
>
> Several countries have demonstrated that this virus can be suppressed and controlled.
>
> “The challenge for many countries who are now dealing with large clusters or community transmission is not whether they can do the same—it’s whether they will.
>
> “I have said from the beginning that countries must take a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach, built around a comprehensive strategy to prevent infections, save lives and minimize impact.
>
> “Let me summarize it in four key areas.
>
> First, prepare and be ready.
>
> Second, detect, protect and treat.
>
> Third, reduce transmission.
>
> Fourth, innovate and learn.
>
> “I remind all countries that we are calling on you to activate and scale up your emergency response mechanisms; communicate with your people about the risks and how they can protect themselves—this is everybody’s business; find, isolate, test and treat every case and trace every contact; ready your hospitals; protect and train your health workers. And let’s all look out for each other, because we need each other.”

At this point in the pandemic, it might be too late to stop the virus—notably in the United States. As such, the goal is to slow the spread so that the health care system is not overwhelmed. STAT News reports that Mike Ryan, head of WHO’s emergency program, said he is concerned about “the caseload, the demand on health workers, the dangers that come with fatigue, and potentially shortages of [personal protective equipment]. We must move quickly.”

WHO isn’t the first organization to declare the new coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. CNN announced Monday that it also would use that term. There is not one universally accepted definition for a pandemic, although the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) differentiates an epidemic from a pandemic as such:

> Epidemic: An increase, often sudden, in the number of cases of a disease above what is normally expected in that population in that area
>
> Pandemic: an epidemic that has spread over several countries or continents, usually affecting

a large number of people

What's more, CNN notes that a pandemic meets three general criteria:

- a virus that can cause illness or death
- sustained person-to-person transmission of that virus
- evidence of spread throughout the world.

The last time the world saw a pandemic was in 2009, when the H1N1 flu caused between about 152,00 to 575,000 deaths worldwide, according to the CDC. The 1918 flu pandemic, also known as the Spanish flu, killed about 50 million people worldwide, CNN reports, noting that more American soldiers died of the flu than were killed in World War I.

For related news, see "UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus," "Watch Out for These Coronavirus and HIV Email Scams" and "UPDATED: What People With Cancer Need to Know About COVID-19." For a complete list of articles, see #Coronavirus and #COVID-19.

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