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# COVID-19 still a global health emergency, says WHO

The world ‘cannot afford to be complacent,’ warns the head of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.



World Health Organization Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus | Pool photo by Fabrice Coffrini via Getty Images

BY ASHLEIGH FURLONG

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The verdict is in: The COVID-19 pandemic is still a global health emergency, the World Health Organization has concluded. But it might not be for much longer.

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The decision from the WHO — exactly three years after COVID-19 was first declared a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) — comes after a meeting of the COVID-19 emergency committee on January 27. WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus concurred with the committee's advice that there is a continued risk posed by COVID-19.

The news comes as countries increasingly deliberate how to move forward from the acute phase of the pandemic, with the U.S. looking at annual COVID-19 boosters, for example. However, the committee found that, globally, there are still a high number of deaths from COVID-19 compared to other infectious respiratory diseases; vaccine uptake is still insufficient in low- and middle-income countries and there is uncertainty about emerging variants.

But the reality is that the pandemic no longer poses the same threat as it did when it spread like wildfire through the globe in 2020. The committee acknowledged this, saying the crisis “may be approaching an inflection point.”

As for exactly how the world will transition away from a PHEIC and into endemicity is still up for debate, with the committee acknowledging that it is unlikely that the virus can be eliminated from human and animal reservoirs. The committee recommended that a proposal be developed for an alternative mechanism that would maintain international focus on COVID-19, even after the crisis is no longer classified as a PHEIC.

For now, Tedros has asked countries to continue work in several areas, including maintaining their focus on vaccination of high-priority groups, improving reporting of COVID-19 surveillance data and increasing uptake of COVID treatments and tests.

"Today's announcement is a recognition that the global threat posed by COVID-19 is not over," said Seth Berkley, CEO of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. "While the world has made remarkable progress over the last two years, implementing the largest and fastest global vaccine rollout in history, we cannot afford to be complacent."

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