

## **Call to Action**

# On Routine and Life-Course Immunization in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A call to action for global, European and national stakeholders and governments to strengthen pandemic preparedness and responsiveness by taking a life-course immunization (LCI) approach which will expand access to vaccines, improve uptake, and ensure optimal protection of all populations.



**Expand vaccination delivery channels**



**Safeguard immunization budgets**



**Encourage catch-up campaigns**

People everywhere have been devastated by the loss of loved ones and impacted by economic and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Policies that strengthen health systems will be critical for staving off additional harm and rebuilding economies.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly the case for countries with limited healthcare capacity, but even in countries with robust health systems, COVID-19 has caused interruptions in immunization services. **The WHO and UNICEF warn that 2020 could be the first time in 28 years that the world sees a reduction in the annual childhood immunization coverage rate.**<sup>2</sup>

Despite the widespread availability of many safe and effective vaccines across the life course, disease outbreaks, disability and deaths from vaccine-preventable diseases continue to occur due to poor vaccine coverage at all ages. The disruption in immunization services as a result of the pandemic may lead to more outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, if not redressed quickly, and this will add further strain to

healthcare systems already overburdened because of COVID-19. In addition, the potential for co-circulation of influenza, or any other epidemic pathogens (for example, measles, respiratory syncytial virus, and meningitis), and COVID-19 could further burden healthcare systems in the upcoming months.<sup>3</sup>

Significant efforts are being put into the development, distribution and administration of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. Until more vaccines become available, we urge **governments everywhere** to follow guidance from the [World Health Organization](#) to **urgently make efforts to safely resume routine immunization<sup>4</sup> and conduct urgent catch-up vaccinations** as soon as possible, prioritizing those most at risk (including children, adolescents, older adults, healthcare workers, and pregnant women).<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> **We call attention to the role of vaccination in protecting the health and well-being of all people around the world, and to the importance of health system capacity and resilience to deliver immunization services across the life span.**<sup>9</sup>

Life-course immunization can contribute to healthier, more productive, and longer lives, which enhances the sustainability of healthcare systems.<sup>12</sup>

We urge governments and all global, European and national stakeholders to:

## Expand vaccination delivery channels and facilitate access to vaccination to build resilient immunization systems in Europe.



- Governments should reduce access barriers to vaccines and vaccination across all populations, in order to recover from the negative impacts of the pandemic on routine vaccination coverage, and in order to be able to implement effective vaccination campaigns against COVID-19 when more vaccines become available.
- Governments should expand vaccine delivery channels to include **pharmacy-based, community-based, employer-based, residential-care-based, and school-based delivery of vaccinations**, to support a successful implementation of life-course immunization. **Developing additional channels for delivery of life-course immunization provides governments with an ideal platform on which to build delivery of mass vaccination for pandemics.** Additional vaccination access points can also facilitate the conduct of vaccination catch-up campaigns, which may be needed because of the disruptions to routine vaccination services caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Since pharmacies are often the entry point to the health system for many<sup>10</sup> for whom pharmacists are the most accessible healthcare professionals, pharmacy-based delivery of vaccination can play a critical role in expanding access to immunization services.<sup>11</sup>
- Increased community delivery of immunization may also have a role to play in countering vaccine hesitancy by increasing the linkages with communities and improving trust,<sup>12</sup> particularly for routine vaccines that have a long, well-established, record of safety.
- Maintaining and growing confidence in vaccination is an urgent public health issue; crucial to preventing the spread of disease, recovering vaccination coverage rates following the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuring that vaccination continues to protect and enhance the health and well-being of the public.

We urge governments and all global, European and national stakeholders to:

**Safeguard immunization budgets that cover adolescent and all appropriate adult populations to preserve the full benefits of country investments in disease prevention, and where feasible to progressively invest in life-course immunization.**



- Governments should allocate appropriate budgets for immunization of adolescents and adults. Insufficient targeted budget allocations have been identified as one of the main barriers to the implementation of life-course immunization.<sup>13</sup> Immunization may save the health system 10 times more than it costs<sup>14</sup> but in the EU, vaccinations account for less than 0,5 % of total healthcare spending.<sup>18</sup> It may be particularly susceptible to cuts in times of economic crisis.
- The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic will make it even more critical for **governments to protect or expand immunization budgets to include life-course immunization as a means to strengthen the resilience of the health system.**
- Adults with chronic conditions and older adults are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical that they have access to vaccination, a cornerstone of primary health care, not just to emergency care,<sup>15</sup> during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Access to life-course immunization, including against influenza, pneumococcal and other epidemic pathogens, will help to prevent further detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on healthcare systems.**<sup>16</sup>
- Life-course immunization will help governments to ensure parity in immunization coverage at all stages of life and enhance the ability of governments to deliver immunization services, both during and outside of pandemics.

We urge governments and all global, European and national stakeholders to:

## Encourage catch-up campaigns for all interrupted vaccine schedules (adolescent, college, travel, adults and the elderly) not just childhood schedules.



- Emphasis is often placed on pediatric immunization coverage; however, **vaccination can prevent an overall great number of deaths in older adults and is essential to living healthier lives.**<sup>17</sup>
- Healthcare workers should assess the vaccination status of all persons at each contact with the healthcare system, and ensure that all age-appropriate recommended vaccines, including influenza vaccine, are administered, as long as vaccine is available, to reduce the burden on health systems and healthcare workers.<sup>5</sup>
- National governments in collaboration with ECDC should provide healthcare providers with emergency guidance on how to maintain routine immunization coverage, conduct catch-up campaigns, and expand immunization access during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>5</sup> other future pandemics or major disruptive events.
- Many countries are making concerted efforts to resume disrupted immunization programs with precautionary measures in place.<sup>7</sup> Governments should exchange frequently on best practices for the management of immunization catch-up campaigns to ensure that immunization services are delivered safely with minimum disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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