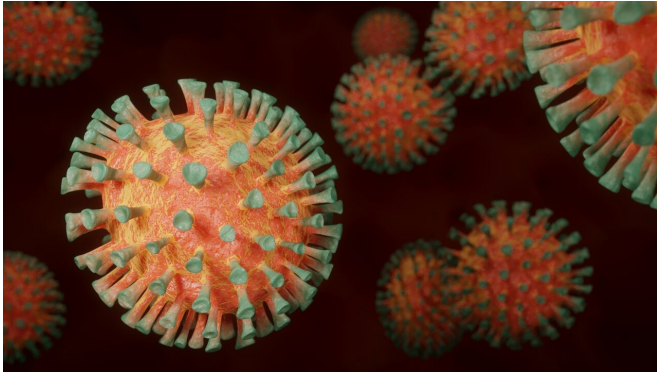


Pandemic won't be over until 70% are vaccinated: WHO director

28 May 2021



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The WHO's European director warned Friday that the COVID-19 pandemic won't end until at least 70 percent of people are vaccinated, and criticized Europe's vaccine rollout as "too slow".

The World Health Organization's regional director for Europe Hans Kluge said countries and their populations must not become complacent about the [pandemic](#).

"Don't think the COVID-19 pandemic is over," Kluge told AFP in an interview, while adding that vaccination rates needed to increase.

"The pandemic will be over once we reach 70 percent minimum coverage in vaccination," the regional director said.

In the 53 countries and territories that make up the WHO's European region—including several in Central Asia—26 percent of the population has received a first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

In the European Union, 36.6 percent of the population has received at least one dose and 16.9 percent have been fully vaccinated, according to a

count by AFP.

Kluge said one of his main concerns was the increased contagiousness of new variants.

"We know for example that the B.1617 (Indian variant) is more transmissible than the B.117 (British variant), which already was more transmissible than the previous strain," Kluge noted.

Cases of the so-called Indian variant have been recorded in 27 of the region's 53 countries, while the number of new cases, and deaths, has fallen for five consecutive weeks, reaching their lowest levels since mid-October.

Speed essential

Worldwide, new cases have dropped for four weeks in a row, according to an AFP tally.

But while vaccines have proven effective against coronavirus mutations, people must still be vigilant, Kluge emphasised.

The Belgian doctor said a major concern was that "people drop their guards that they become complacent," especially going into the [summer months](#).

In addition, large gatherings are on the horizon in conjunction with the European football championship.

"Let's finally give COVID-19 the red card, don't allow extra time for COVID-19," Kluge quipped, repeating advice to maintain social distances and wear face masks.

He also underscored that speed is "of essence" during the pandemic.

"Our best friend is speed, time is working against

us, (and) the vaccination roll-out still goes too slow," Kluge said.

"We need to accelerate, we need to enlarge the number of vaccines," and European countries needed to show more solidarity.

"It is not acceptable that some countries start to vaccinate the younger, healthy part of the population, while other countries in our region still did not cover all the health care workers and the most vulnerable people," Kluge said.

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APA citation: Pandemic won't be over until 70% are vaccinated: WHO director (2021, May 28) retrieved 8 June 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-pandemic-wont-vaccinated-director.html>

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