

Citation: World Health Organization. COVID-19 Recommendations. African Journal of Medical Sciences, 2021, 6 (7) ajmsc.info

WHO Reports

WHO recommends Life-saving Interleukin-6 Receptor Blockers for COVID-19 and urges Producers to join Efforts to rapidly increase Access

The World Health Organization (WHO) has updated its patient care guidelines to include interleukin-6 receptor blockers, a class of medicines that are lifesaving in patients who are severely or critically ill with COVID-19, especially when administered alongside corticosteroids.

These were the findings from a prospective and a living network meta-analysis initiated by WHO, the largest such analysis on the drugs to date. Data from over 10 000 patients enrolled in 27 clinical trials were considered.

These are the first drugs found to be effective against COVID-19 since corticosteroids were recommended by WHO in September 2020.

Patients severely or critically ill with COVID-19 often suffer from an overreaction of the immune system, which can be very harmful to the patient's health. Interleukin-6 blocking drugs (tocilizumab and sarilumab) act to suppress this overreaction.

The prospective and living network meta-analyses showed that in severely or critically ill patients, administering these drugs reduce the odds of death by 13%, compared to standard care. This means that there will be 15 fewer deaths per thousand patients, and as many as 28 fewer deaths for every thousand critically ill patients. The odds of mechanical ventilation among severe and critical patients are reduced by 28%, compared with standard care. This translates to 23 fewer patients out of a thousand needing mechanical ventilation.

Clinical trial investigators in 28 countries shared data with WHO, including pre-publication data. Researchers worldwide compiled and analyzed the data. With the support of these critical partnerships, WHO has been able to issue a rapid and trustworthy recommendation for the use of interleukin-6 receptor blockers in severe and critical COVID-19 patients.

“These drugs offer hope for patients and families who are suffering from the devastating impact of severe and critical COVID-19. But IL-6 receptor blockers remain inaccessible and unaffordable for the majority of the world,” said WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. “The inequitable distribution of vaccines means that people in low- and middle-income countries are most susceptible to severe forms of COVID-19. So, the greatest need for these drugs is in countries that currently have the least access. We must urgently change this.”

To increase access and affordability of these life-saving products, WHO calls on manufacturers to reduce prices and make supplies available to low- and middle-income countries, especially where COVID-19 is surging. WHO also encourages companies to agree to transparent, non-exclusive voluntary licensing agreements using the C-TAP platform and the Medicines Patent Pool, or to waive exclusivity rights.

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In addition, WHO has launched an expression of interest for prequalification of manufacturers of interleukin-6 receptor blockers. Prequalification of innovator and biosimilar products aims to expand the availability of quality-assured products and to increase access through market competition and reduce prices to meet urgent public health needs

UN report: Pandemic Year marked by Spike in World Hunger

There was a dramatic worsening of world hunger in 2020, the United Nations said today – much of it likely related to the fallout of COVID-19. While the pandemic’s impact has yet to be fully mapped, a multi-agency report estimates that around a tenth of the global population – up to 811 million people – were undernourished last year. The number suggests it will take a tremendous effort for the world to honour its pledge to end hunger by 2030.

This year’s edition of The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World is the first global assessment of its kind in the pandemic era. The report is jointly published by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Previous editions had already put the world on notice that the food security of millions – many children among them – was at stake. “Unfortunately, the pandemic continues to expose weaknesses in our food systems, which threaten the lives and livelihoods of people around the world,” the heads of the five UN agencies write in this year’s Foreword.

They go on to warn of a “critical juncture,” even as they pin fresh hopes on increased diplomatic momentum. “This year offers a unique opportunity for advancing food security and nutrition through transforming food systems with the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit, the Nutrition for Growth Summit and the COP26 on climate change.” “The outcome of these events,” the five add, “will go on to shape the [...] second half of the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition” – a global policy commitment yet to hit its stride.

The numbers in detail

Already in the mid-2010s, hunger had started creeping upwards, dashing hopes of irreversible decline. Disturbingly, in 2020 hunger shot up in both absolute and proportional terms, outpacing population growth: some 9.9 percent of all people are estimated to have been undernourished last year, up from 8.4 percent in 2019.

More than half of all undernourished people (418 million) live in Asia; more than a third (282 million) in Africa; and a smaller proportion (60 million) in Latin America and the Caribbean. But the sharpest rise in hunger was in Africa, where the estimated prevalence of undernourishment – at 21 percent of the population – is more than double that of any other region.

On other measurements too, the year 2020 was somber. Overall, more than 2.3 billion people (or 30 percent of the global population) lacked year-round access to adequate food: this indicator – known as the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity – leapt in one year as much in as the preceding five combined. Gender inequality deepened: for every 10 food-insecure men, there were 11 food-insecure women in 2020 (up from 10.6 in 2019).

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Malnutrition persisted in all its forms, with children paying a high price: in 2020, over 149 million under-fives are estimated to have been stunted, or too short for their age; more than 45 million – wasted, or too thin for their height; and nearly 39 million – overweight. A full three-billion adults and children remained locked out of healthy diets, largely due to excessive costs. Nearly a third of women of reproductive age suffer from anaemia. Globally, despite progress in some areas – more infants, for example, are being fed exclusively on breast milk – the world is not on track to achieve targets for any nutrition indicators by 2030.

Other hunger and malnutrition drivers

In many parts of the world, the pandemic has triggered brutal recessions and jeopardized access to food. Yet even before the pandemic, hunger was spreading; progress on malnutrition lagged. This was all the more so in nations affected by conflict, climate extremes or other economic downturns, or battling high inequality – all of which the report identifies as major drivers of food insecurity, which in turn interact.

On current trends, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* estimates that Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger by 2030) will be missed by a margin of nearly 660 million people. Of these 660 million, some 30 million may be linked to the pandemic’s lasting effects.

What can (still) be done

As outlined in last year’s report, transforming food systems is essential to achieve food security, improve nutrition and put healthy diets within reach of all. This year’s edition goes further to outline six “transformation pathways”. These, the authors say, rely on a “coherent set of policy and investment portfolios” to counteract the hunger and malnutrition drivers.

Depending on the particular driver (or combination of drivers) confronting each country, the report urges policymakers to:

- Integrate humanitarian, development and peace building policies in conflict areas – for example, through social protection measures to prevent families from selling meagre assets in exchange for food;
- Scale up climate resilience across food systems – for example, by offering smallholder farmers wide access to climate risk insurance and forecast-based financing;
- Strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable to economic adversity – for example, through in-kind or cash support programmes to lessen the impact of pandemic-style shocks or food price volatility;
- Intervene along supply chains to lower the cost of nutritious foods – for example, by encouraging the planting of biofortified crops or making it easier for fruit and vegetable growers to access markets;
- Tackle poverty and structural inequalities – for example, by boosting food value chains in poor communities through technology transfers and certification programmes;
- Strengthen food environments and changing consumer behaviour – for example, by

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eliminating industrial trans fats and reducing the salt and sugar content in the food supply, or protecting children from the negative impact of food marketing.

The report also calls for an “enabling environment of governance mechanisms and institutions” to make transformation possible. It enjoins policymakers to consult widely; to empower women and youth; and to expand the availability of data and new technologies. Above all, the authors urge, the world must act *now* – or watch the drivers of hunger and malnutrition recur with growing intensity in coming years, long after the shock of the pandemic has passed.

WHO Global Conference on Communicating Science during Health Emergencies sparks Enormous Public Interest

How can we communicate scientific uncertainty? Can the use of humor, serious games and arts help us to make science more understandable? What can we do to communicate scientific processes in a more transparent way?

These and more questions were discussed at the WHO global conference on communicating science during health emergencies, which took place virtually from 7 to 25 June 2021. In a world marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, everybody has become a science communicator – may it be at work, the dinner table or on social media. The conference convened professional and every-day science communicators from a broad range of disciplines to identify the challenges they encountered during pandemics and find solutions to make science accessible and relevant to all. The public opening of the conference featured five renowned keynote speakers from academia and practice. Their presentations covered topics as diverse as conveying uncertainty and statistics to the public, using social media to promote protective measures and the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration to translate scientific messages into easily understandable visuals. Over 3000 participants from 159 countries joined the opening and submitted close to 500 questions to the speakers.

The public closing featured two invited keynote speeches highlighting the potential of using social media and storytelling techniques to mitigate the infodemic. The session also presented three innovative science communication concepts using illustrations, a children’s book and a Q&A format to reach diverse target audiences. The examples had been selected through a global call for good practice cases launched by WHO in April 2021. An expert panel further reported back on the thematic discussions during the closed sessions of the conference. These were held with 61 invited researchers, media representatives, decision-makers and professionals working in health, education, tourism and culture from 26 countries.

To date, the sessions’ opening and closing recordings were viewed more than 20 000 times on YouTube. These numbers show an enormous interest of the public in the topic of science communication during the pandemic.

Lessons learnt from the expert discussions

Participants identified key steps towards effective science translation: First, a need to re-think

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existing scientific processes to ensure research is being shared in a timely manner during health crises but still undergoes quality control and scientific debate. This also includes a transparent communication of scientific processes to help people understand what science can and cannot do. While the public often expects science to provide clear answers, scientific knowledge generation takes time, is built on scientific debate and is in fact inherently linked to uncertainty. Open communication of this uncertainty will prevent people from losing trust in science when the constantly evolving evidence leads to changing public health recommendations.

Second, the concerns, beliefs and needs of target audiences need to be taken more into consideration when communicating science. There is no one-size-fits all solution. Instead of “pouring out” general information, a constant dialogue with communities is required to ensure the scientific information is relevant, understandable and credible to them. The continuous dialogue with different stakeholder groups will also help to build trust in science and encourage people to ask questions and voice concerns.

Third, it takes innovation and creativity for effective science translation. People consume information on different channels, at different times of the day and in different formats. Science communication should add to people’s lives in a meaningful and action-oriented manner and meet them where they are in terms of preferences, values and beliefs.

Next steps

WHO is committed to translate the insights from the conference into action. Not just to improve science translation and manage the infodemic during the COVID-19 pandemic but also to be prepared for the next health emergency. Follow-up activities of the conference will include:

- Building a global, multidisciplinary network of science communicators. A continuous dialogue with researchers, media representatives, decision-makers and professionals working in health, education, culture and tourism will help to identify and address challenges in a concerted, collaborative manner;
- Developing capacity building resources for science communicators to empower them to judge the quality and independence of scientific research and share this with their audiences.;
- Strengthening scientific and health literacy to empower people to ask critical questions about the information they encounter on- and offline and make evidence-informed decisions;
- Analyzing existing good practice examples of science communication to understand what works and what does not work, and develop more effective, innovative science communication concepts for the future.

The enormous interest in the global conference confirmed WHO’s mandate to play a key role in science communication and infodemic management during health emergencies. The timely implementation of follow-up activities will be crucial to support countries and the multidisciplinary science communication community to build trust in science and make it

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accessible and understandable to all.

The recordings of the opening and closing session as well as presentations are available.

References

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