

WHO/ECDC: Nearly half a million lives saved by COVID-19 vaccination in less than a year

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A new study by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) published in *Eurosurveillance* estimates that 470,000 lives have been saved among those aged 60 years and over since the start of COVID-19 vaccination roll-out in 33 countries across the WHO European Region.

This estimate does not include lives saved by vaccinating people less than 60 years nor lives saved from the indirect effect of vaccination because of a reduction in transmission.

Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe says, “COVID-19 has exacted a devastating death toll in our Region, but we can now categorically say that without COVID-19 vaccines as a tool to contain this pandemic, many more people would have died.

“The COVID-19 vaccines are a marvel of modern science and what this research shows is that they’re doing what they promised, that is saving lives, offering very high protection against severe illness and death. In some countries, the death toll would have been double what it is now without the vaccines. It is therefore critically important that all Member States in the European Region achieve high coverage for people in the at-risk groups as soon as possible. Countries with lower vaccination uptake rates must continue to prioritize those who are at highest risk and protect the vulnerable groups as rapidly as possible.”

“But vaccines must be accompanied by a range of preventive measures to keep transmission levels low and keep society open.”

Since December 2019 over 1.5 million SARS-CoV-2 confirmed fatalities have been recorded in the countries of the WHO European Region, with 90.2% in those aged 60 years and over. The rapid development and administration of COVID-19 vaccines has provided much-needed protection from severe disease and death for millions of the most vulnerable, but the speed and extent of rollout of these vaccines across countries of the WHO European Region is inequitable.

Avoiding severe illness and death

Husband and wife Frank and Barbara Durrant aged 78 and 74, respectively, live in East Devon in the United Kingdom and have four grandchildren. After receiving their second COVID-19 vaccination they caught the virus but made speedy recoveries.

Barbara Durrant says, “I contracted COVID-19 approximately 5 weeks ago and suffered only a mild cold and loss of taste for a couple of weeks. I feel quite sure that being double vaccinated saved me from being much more seriously affected. Sadly, I lost a very dear,

very fit friend who died of the virus before the vaccine was available. She had no choice.”

“Having received my second vaccination, I caught COVID-19 following an extended time spent in close contact with a friend who had the virus. The symptoms were so mild that were it not for a positive test I would have considered myself to have been fully fit. I attribute this, without doubt, to the fact that I had been doubly vaccinated,” says Frank Durrant.

Methodology

The authors from WHO/Europe and ECDC estimated the number of deaths among adults aged 60 years and older in the 33 countries in the European Region that would have happened without any vaccines using the actual weekly reported death counts.

They then calculated the number of lives saved from COVID-19 vaccination as the difference between these estimates and the reported number of deaths from December 2020 to November 2021 for those aged 60 years and over.

They estimated that COVID-19 vaccination saved 469,186 lives in this age group in the 33 countries during the study period – reducing the expected number of deaths by approximately half. In 30 countries with data also available in smaller age groups, the largest number of lives saved was among those aged 80 years and over (261,421 lives).

Uptake of the complete dose series of COVID-19 vaccines in those aged 60 years and over now ranges from 20% to 100% among the 33 countries under study. The study estimated that the largest number of lives saved was in countries where COVID-19 vaccination rollout was early and uptake in the target group was also high. Other countries experienced limited effects of vaccination because their vaccine roll-out was either slower or rolled out in parallel with the on-going effective use of non-pharmaceutical interventions to reduce transmission.

Dr Andrea Ammon, ECDC Director says,

“The consequences of low vaccination rates in some countries are currently being reflected in overloaded health care systems and high mortality rates. We urge Member States to continue focusing on closing immunization gaps, especially among the most vulnerable individuals and those at highest risk of severe disease.

There are still too many individuals at risk of severe COVID-19 infection whom we need to protect as soon as possible. Even in countries that have achieved good overall vaccination coverage, there are still sub-populations and age groups in which coverage remains lower than desired. The vaccination of older age groups must continue to be an urgent priority for saving the most lives in the weeks and months to come.”

Vaccination essential together with other preventive measures

Vaccination is one part of the toolbox of important measures needed to curb the pandemic, but on its own it won't end the health crisis.

A range of other measures that limit transmission of the virus are needed. They are essential to help keep society open as well as lessen the pressure on strained health care systems and health care workers exhausted by more than 18-months on the frontline of the pandemic.

“First of all – get vaccinated. Vaccination is saving lives in all age groups,” says Dr Kluge. “We know the virus thrives in closed, crowded and confined spaces, and that’s why we must also follow measures known to reduce transmission, especially now the colder weather is driving us to gather indoors.”

“Wear a mask in crowded, closed and confined spaces, cover coughs and sneezes, keep physical distance from other people and wash your hands regularly. Ventilation is important too, so if it’s safe to do so open a window or a door to let in fresh air. It’s important that authorities take these measures and that we do all of these for the protection of ourselves and others, even if we are fully vaccinated, because based on the available evidence vaccination greatly reduces but cannot stop virus transmission altogether.”

“By making these actions part of our daily routine, we can all help stop infection and the spread of the virus. In the same way that we routinely put on a seatbelt when driving, we should think to wash our hands, wear a mask or keep distance from other people, to protect from infection.”

Until the pandemic is over countries must keep in place strong public health measures such as free of charge testing, contact tracing to break chains of transmission as well as urgently reach out to all individuals in priority groups for vaccination who have not already received a full series.