



## COVID-19 surge threatens health in the Gaza strip

A spike in cases is raising concerns over hospital beds, oxygen supplies, and mental health. Sharmila Devi reports.

For the WHO April 22 situation report see <https://who18.createsend.com/campaigns/reports/viewCampaign.aspx?d=j&c=99FA4938D049E3A8&ID=D50726229BF6EF4A2540EF23F30FEDED&temp=False&tx=0&source=Report&fbclid=IwAR2kM6UCXPa1oYSclcvajxOcg0iLW80UX0WPuk429XzWM5DepTPKnI159yg>

For the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs April 12 report see <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/covid-19-emergency-situation-report-29>

The Gaza Strip is grappling with a surge in COVID-19 cases, with shortages of medicines and intensive care capacity leading the Palestinian Ministry of Health to declare almost all of the territory a “red zone”, meaning that community transmission is high.

“With this second wave there is a dramatic increase of cases, with increased occupancy of beds at the assigned hospitals despite the continuous increase of beds. All aspects of life are affected in Gaza, social and economic”, Ghada Al-Jadba chief of Gaza’s health programme for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees, told *The Lancet*. All non-urgent surgery was suspended while there was an urgent need for more staff, specialists, and intensive care unit training, she said.

There was a rise of 21% to 11334 confirmed cases in the week before April 22, 2021, compared with the week before in Gaza and the West Bank, according to WHO. In total, 100 000 cases have been confirmed and 819 deaths among Gaza’s population of 2 million and in the West Bank about 221 000 cases and more than 2500 deaths.

The WHO’s April 22 situation report stated that “The WHO risk assessment remains very high: COVID-19 infections in the Gaza Strip account for two-thirds of all cases in the [occupied Palestinian territory] oPt, with some signs of reaching a plateau but the situation remains critical”. “In the West Bank, a similar story, with new infections declining slowly but hospitals still struggling.”

The ministry of health says that testing capacity is low, especially for highly infectious variants such as B.1.1.7, which WHO says has been driving many of Gaza’s cases.

The pandemic was initially slow to spread in Gaza, which has been mostly blockaded by land, sea, and air by Israel and Egypt since 2007 when the Islamic group Hamas won parliamentary elections. Palestinians call the blockade collective punishment, saying it damaged Gaza’s

**“The reluctance of many, including medical staff, to be vaccinated remains a key concern’...”**

economy and medical infrastructure before the pandemic.

Hamas introduced curfews and restrictions on movement after the first community case was reported in August, 2020. Cases have risen since February, 2021, as restrictions were lifted. Some restrictions have been reimposed including a night curfew after 7pm during Ramadan, which started on April 13.

Although more than 53% of Israelis have been vaccinated, only 3% of Palestinians have received a first dose. Israel is vaccinating around 120 000 Palestinians who are employed in Israel or in Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Rights groups say that, under international law, Israel as the occupying power is responsible for public health in Gaza and the West Bank, but Israel denies this.

Gaza has received more than 100 000 doses of vaccines from Russia, United Arab Emirates, and the international COVAX programme, but vaccine hesitancy is high. 54.2% of the population said they would not accept a vaccine, according to a survey on April 21, by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre. “The reluctance of many, including medical staff, to be vaccinated remains a key concern”, the UN Office

for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in its March situation report released on April 12.

Health authorities in Gaza had stepped up requests for supplies such as oxygen, but even if they arrive, other challenges remain, including erratic electricity supply because of the blockade. “There’s a need for back-up generators, but even they don’t always work so you need a back-up for the back-up”, Rachele Seguin, medical coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières, told *The Lancet*. “We have been able to continue our work with the war-wounded and antimicrobial resistance which is a big issue here, but it’s very challenging. The lack of vaccinations might mean more waves of COVID-19.”

Mental health is also a concern. “The surge of mental health conditions is not merely a medical phenomenon but a social phenomenon. It is not because of the lack of medical care but the lack of access to life”, Akihiro Seit, director of UNRWA’s health programme, told *The Lancet*. “This underlines the importance of global, universal access to vaccines as vaccines are the only way to get COVID-19 under control.”

Gaza’s humanitarian situation was precarious before COVID-19, with unemployment at more than 50% and 70% among young people. UNRWA, which cares for Palestinian refugees across the region, had received only 22% of the US\$417 million needed this year, the UN said on April 22. Amid the pandemic, the conflict grinds on. Israeli warplanes attacked Gaza on April 24 after militants fired rockets into Israel while there have been violent clashes in Jerusalem between Palestinians and far-right Jewish groups.

Sharmila Devi