

COVID-19 Burden & At-Risk Groups

- Global Perspectives



COVID-19 in 2026: Still a Major Threat

Ongoing impact in Europe & Australia

Key facts:

- 47,000 new global cases (Jan-Feb 2026)
- 63.7% from Europe
- ICU admissions continue in Europe, and Admissions
- COVID-19 remains a leading respiratory cause of death
- Constant variant shifts require vaccine matching



Testing is down, and cases are likely underestimated. COVID-19 now co-circulates with influenza and RSV. **It's not over, only evolving.**

Vulnerability: Who is Most at Risk?

Risk is additive, not isolated

High-risk groups:

- Elderly (immunosenesescence begins about 50 years)
- Chronic disease and immunocompromised
- Pregnant women
- Conflict and displaced populations
- Aged care residents
- Indigenous peoples



In Europe, high epidemiological risk: Bulgaria, Portugal, Latvia, Greece, showing that southern and eastern Europe have a higher structural vulnerability

Vulnerability = Age + Comorbidities + Poverty + Overcrowding + Weak health systems.

Vaccination: The Decisive Difference

Portugal vs. Bulgaria case study

Same risk profile:

- Similar elderly population
- Similar comorbid burden
- Similar epidemiological risk index

Critical difference:

- Portugal had a very high vaccine uptake → Low excess mortality
- Bulgaria had a very low vaccine uptake → High excess mortality (especially in 2021)

Vaccination dramatically reduces excess mortality. It also reduces Intensive Care Unit (ICU) overload, secondary bacterial infections, antibiotic overuse, and the long COVID-19 burden.



The True Cost of COVID-19

Economic and systemic impact

Global spending

- 2017: \$7.5 trillion
- 2019: \$8.5 trillion
- 2023: \$9.8 trillion
- 11-12% per capita overspend (high-income countries)

UK case study:

- About £260 billion total cost
- Only 21% spent on healthcare
- Most funds go to economic survival measures

Beyond money, it leads to health workforce burnout, disrupted services, long COVID-19 disability, and productivity loss. Vaccination = economic protection.



The Path Forward: Resilience and Vaccination

What makes a successful response?

Strengthen health system resilience

- Governance matters
- Fund preparedness plans
- Invest in workforce retention
- Digital health transformation
- Intersectoral “One Health” approach

Improving vaccine uptake requires alignment between the government, healthcare and public health professionals, the public, and the media.

Healthcare workers are a multiplier effect.

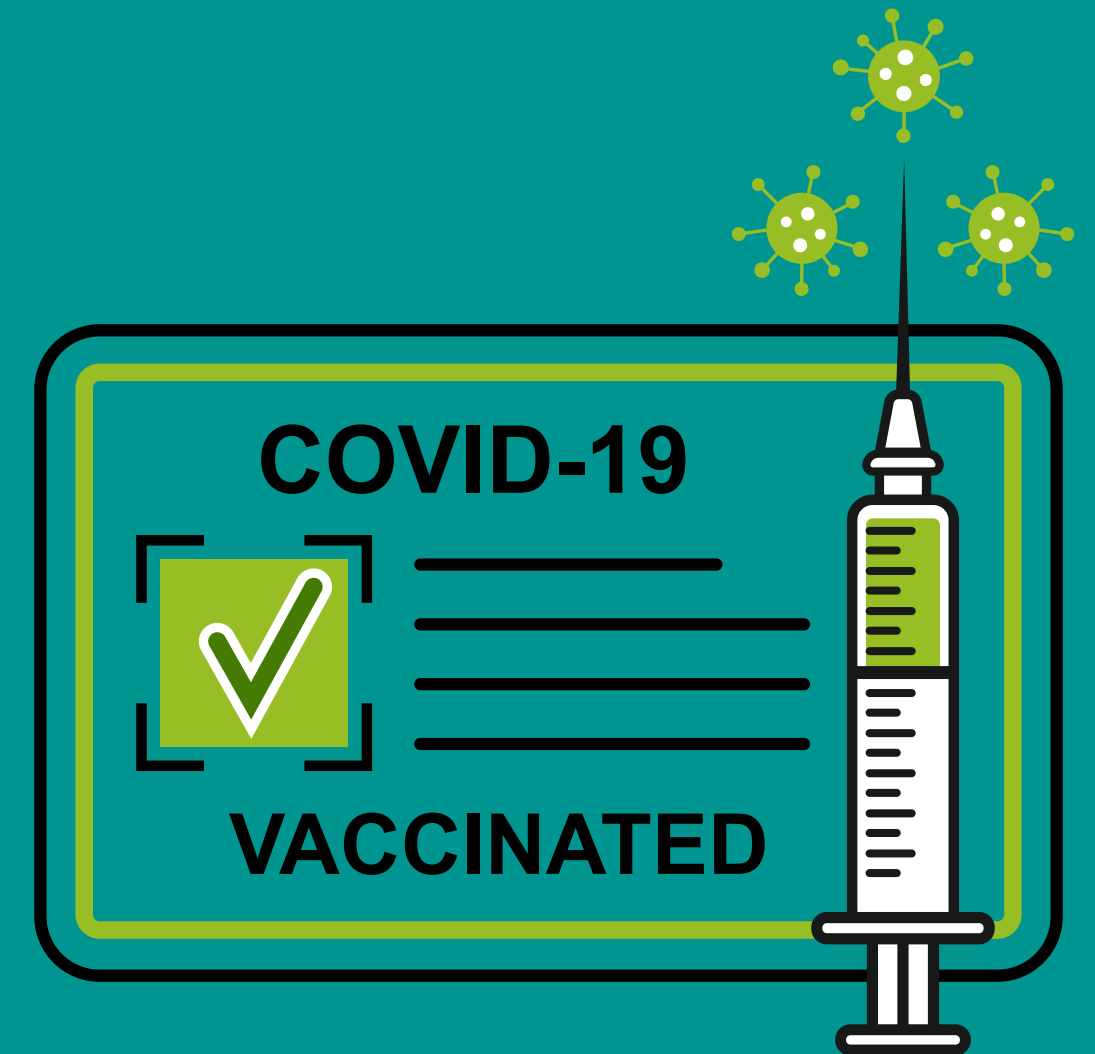
When they protect themselves, they protect patients, and this increases trust.



Preparedness Must Become Permanent

Vaccination and resilient health systems means...

- Fewer deaths
- Lower excess mortality
- Less ICU overload
- Reduced antimicrobial resistance
- Stronger economies



COVID-19 remains a structural threat.