

Special Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe 10–11 May 2022

Statement of the European Respiratory Society

Since the start of the Russian Federation's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine, patients with respiratory diseases as well as the population living in areas most affected by the war have suffered serious health consequences in horrendous conditions. The European Respiratory Society salutes the bravery of Ukrainian medical teams on the frontline¹. We commend the work of humanitarian agencies and, in particular recognise the work of WHO on the ground – delivering essential respiratory medical supplies to those that need them. We condemn in the strongest possible terms the military aggression of the Russian Federation.

This devastating situation occurs during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been one of the most challenging times for our respiratory health in history². People with the virus in the areas where hostilities are taking place do not have the opportunity to seek medical help. Moreover, it is almost impossible to keep track of cases and epidemic prevention measures are difficult to follow in overpopulated shelters. It is important to remember that the vaccination campaign against COVID-19 in Ukraine began on 24 February 2021 and only around 36.93% of the population were vaccinated with two doses when war broke out³.

Pre-war Ukraine was busy battling diseases such as tuberculosis resistant to medicines. With an already exhausted sanitary system, the war has caused a lack of availability of medicines, personnel and treatments. This conflict is jeopardising decades of efforts in fighting these problems. Overpopulated shelters (with difficult living conditions) risk to be clusters for respiratory diseases such as pneumonia and tuberculosis⁴. The eastern areas of the WHO European region (including Ukraine, Russia and also bordering countries such as Belarus and Moldova), account for the largest burden of multidrug-resistant (MDR)-TB in the world. Even before the war, the diagnosis and treatment of patients with M/XDR-TB in Ukraine was limited by availability of diagnostic tools and medicines.⁵ The migration of millions of people fleeing to other parts of Europe is likely to exacerbate the spread of TB and other respiratory diseases⁶.

Massive environmental damage is having a big impact on the health of Ukrainians. As of the end of March, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of Ukraine recorded 111 attacks against industrial sites, energy plants, water stations, gas pipelines and unique natural resources. Kyiv, Donetsk and Luhansk regions are the most affected in terms of environmental damage. These attacks will cause a health impact that Ukrainians will feel long after the war ends⁷. As some of the heaviest fighting took place around Kyiv, the air quality in the city has plummeted with pollutant concentration reaching values 27.8 times higher than the WHO air quality guidelines. People living in heavily bombed areas have sustained exposure to fine dust particles from destroyed buildings, which are often mixed with heavy metals and other toxic substances. Ukrainians staying in areas with intense hostilities are likely to see an increase in asthma, pneumonia and acute bronchitis. The long-term consequences of the war will likely see a rise in chronic respiratory diseases and lung cancers.

¹ <https://www.ersnet.org/news-and-features/news/ers-elf-statement-of-solidarity-to-those-affected-by-invasion-of-ukraine/>

<https://www.ersnet.org/news-and-features/news/ers-statement-to-support-aid-in-ukraine/>

² <https://www.ersnet.org/news-and-features/news/ers-elf-statement-of-solidarity-to-those-affected-by-invasion-of-ukraine/>

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/impact-war-dynamics-covid-19-ukraine>

⁴ <https://www.focus.it/scienza/salute/ucraina-guerra-catastrofe-sanitaria>

⁵ <https://erj.ersjournals.com/content/59/4/2200493>

⁶ *Other diseases like Cystic Fibrosis will require specific treatments and patients have already started arriving in countries like Ireland and Italy, which is expecting to continue receiving a number of patients (adults and children) with a diagnosis or suspected cystic fibrosis.*

⁷ <https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/health-peril-war-takes-heavy-toll-ukraines-environment>