



PPS-PIDSP Statement on COVID-19 Vaccines for Children

9 August 2021

Recent media reports of children affected with severe COVID-19 has caused much concern in the Philippines; the issue of vaccinating the pediatric age group has again come up. The Department of Health (DOH), in its Press Release dated August 9, 2021, has clarified that the increase in COVID-19 cases is being experienced in all age groups and not just in children. Moreover, the recent increase in overall cases may be driven in part by the Delta variant, which is known to be more contagious.

National data on COVID-19 confirmed pediatric cases (see Figure below) show overall higher incidence among adolescents but an increase in mortality among the youngest age group. Data from the National Children's Hospital has shown an increase in admissions in July, 2021, with a higher involvement of the younger age group, i.e., 19 children with COVID-19 were admitted in July compared to 12 in June; the most affected age group is ≤ 5 years-old (59 cases out of 100 patients admitted since the start of the year). The Philippine Children's Medical Center has shown a different trend: 5 confirmed cases in July compared to 18 in June, but with similar higher cases in younger children (0-1 years-old = 20 cases, 2-5 years-old = 13 cases) out of a total of 69 confirmed cases for the year. At the Philippine General Hospital and the Philippine Children's Medical Center, more cases of COVID-19 in children were seen last March, April and May 2021 compared to July of the same year. Majority of these hospital admissions across all pediatric age groups involve children with co-morbidities.

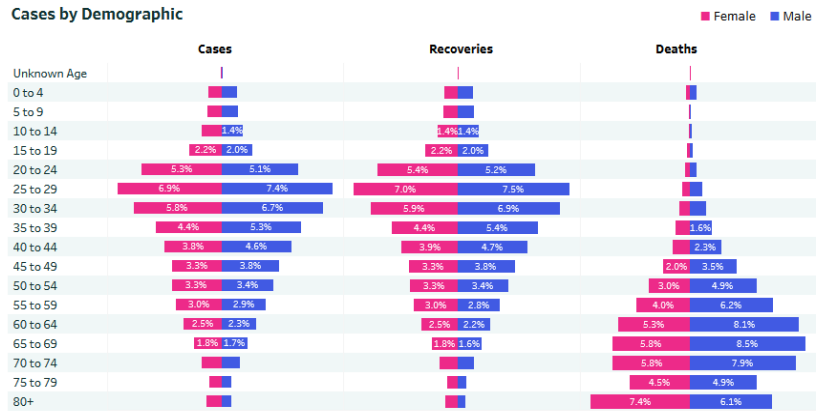


Figure 1. COVID-19 Confirmed cases in the Philippines divided by sex and age group. More teenagers are affected but those less than 5 years-old have highest mortality. (Ref: <https://doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker> accessed Aug 9, 2021)

There is lack of comprehensive local data on hospital admissions, case severity, and disease outcomes amongst the different pediatric age groups, although studies are ongoing. Research is also being done to determine if the Delta variant causes increased incidence in children compared to other age groups. Currently, there is yet no concrete evidence to support that this variant is more virulent and may cause more severe disease in children. Other studies on safety and efficacy of vaccines in young children are also ongoing. At present, young children are not yet included in vaccination programs in any country.

Vaccine coverage for the Philippines has reached about 10% for those who are fully vaccinated. There are still suboptimal vaccination rates among senior citizens while the vaccination of economic front liners, those that cannot remain at home, is only just beginning. Vaccine supply remains a continuing challenge although the government is ramping up its vaccination efforts. Thus, majority of adults remain unvaccinated, whereas studies have shown that children are usually infected with SARS-CoV-2 from an adult. In the context of the Philippine situation wherein there is still no in-person schooling, the best way to protect children against COVID-19 is to vaccinate the adults who take care of them. Vaccinating qualified adult household members not only protect these individuals, but also extends protection to children and other vulnerable persons who cannot be vaccinated (i.e. “cocoon” strategy).

In view of these considerations, the Philippine Pediatric Society (PPS) and the Pediatric Infectious Disease Society of the Philippines (PIDSP) recommend that the older and more vulnerable adult age groups should still be given precedence in the vaccination roll-out. Once a sufficient percentage has been vaccinated in the priority adult groups, children 12 years-old and above may be considered for vaccination, with priority given to those who live in areas with high transmission and those with co-morbidities.