Influenza situation in Eastern Mediterranean Region in 2018

Seasonal influenza has a substantial public health and economic burden. In 2018, no major upsurge of cases or influenza epidemics were reported from the countries of WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Editorial note

Seasonal influenza is an acute respiratory infection caused by influenza viruses which circulate in all parts of the world. Illness from influenza infection Illnesses range from mild to severe and even death. Hospitalization and death occur mainly among high risk groups such as the extreme age groups, pregnant women and those with chronic health conditions. Worldwide, annual epidemics of influenza are estimated to result in about 3 to 5 million cases of severe illness, and about 290,000 to 650,000 respiratory deaths.

Surveillance for seasonal influenza is essential to monitor the circulation patterns of influenza virus, identify new variants, assess severity and monitor health impact of influenza in general populations. Information on influenza virus types are also important for selection of influenza vaccine strains and composition.

Since 2006, influenza surveillance systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region has been strengthened and enhanced. Currently, 18 of the 22 countries in the Region are conducting sentinel-based surveillance for seasonal influenza. During 2018, a total of 107,269 specimens were tested for influenza and other respiratory pathogens in the National Influenza Centres (NICs) from these countries in the Region. Out of tested specimens, 21,609 (20.1%) were positive for influenza. 73% of influenza positive cases were due to influenza A while influenza B represented 27% of the total positive cases.

The positive specimens included 8,794 (41%) influenza A(H1N1)pdm09 virus and 3771 (17%) were influenza A(H3) virus. Influenza B (Lineage not determined) virus accounted for 5899 (23%). (See table).

During 2018, National Influenza Centres (NICs) in the EMR also tested and reported results of more than 100,000 influenza specimens. More than one fifth of them were positive for influenza. Influenza A (H1N1)pdm09 remained the pre-dominantly dominant circulating influenza virus subtype the EMR (See graph) during 2018.

Epidemiological and virological surveillance for influenza remains the effective system to identify circulating virus types and their relationship to global and regional patterns. Such systems also allow the countries to determine seasonality. Such systems need to be maintained as threats from pandemic influenza can only be effectively monitored through a string surveillance system for seasonal influenza generating good quality data to understand the patterns, trend and severity.