

Current major event

Decreased influenza surveillance during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has overwhelmed health systems in the Region and around the world. As a result, influenza surveillance has markedly decreased not just in resource-poor countries or countries affected by humanitarian emergencies, but also in countries with significant resources and capacities.

Editorial note

Since the H1N1 pandemic and the H5N1 threat, WHO has been committed to pandemic influenza preparedness. Surveillance for novel influenza viruses with pandemic potential has been a priority as these outbreaks have the potential to cause devastating losses. As a result, regional capacities of severe acute respiratory infection, acute respiratory infection, and influenza-like syndromic surveillance systems have been strengthened.

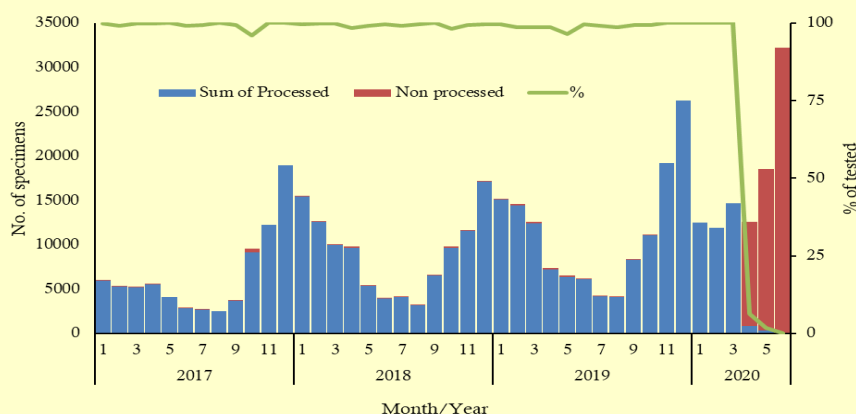
With the emergence of SARS-CoV-2, these surveillance capacities were aptly leveraged and used as one of the cornerstones of COVID-19 response. The existing systems allowed countries to rapidly scale up capacity to screen for and monitor COVID-19 transmission within their communities. However, as these components of respiratory surveillance were harnessed for COVID-19 response, there has been a noted concomitant decline in influenza testing, data reporting, and virus sharing as compared to previous influenza seasons.

Although the reported number of specimens received and processed by National Influenza Centres (NICs) was remarkably increased compared to the same period during previous years, the number of specimens reportedly tested for influenza was dramatically decreased (see graph). Moreover, the number of countries reporting to the global influenza platform (FluNet) was significantly reduced starting in March, with the rise of COVID-19 cases in the Region (see table).

Thus, the threat of pandemic influenza remains. The noted decrease in influenza surveillance renders countries in a position whereby influenza viruses with pandemic potential may be missed during the initial critical phase of transmission, and with less data on viruses available, vaccine strain selection will also suffer.

Given the potential risks of co-circulation of influenza and SARS-CoV-2 during the up-

Number of specimens received and processed by NICs, EMR, 2017-2020



No. of countries reported to FluNet, EMR, 2017-2020

Month	2017	2018	2019	2020
January	14	15	16	15
February	14	15	16	15
March	14	15	16	10
April	14	15	16	6
May	14	15	15	6
June	13	15	15	3

coming influenza season, vigilance is essential. Action must be taken to strengthen existing national influenza surveillance systems for both influenza and COVID-19 using strategies that are specifically tailored to the needs of each country. WHO is calling for NICs and associated influenza surveillance systems to:

- share both seasonal and zoonotic influenza viruses in a timely fashion and in accordance with NIC TORs;
- hold regular, periodic reviews of laboratory, surveillance and response capacities with respect to both influenza and COVID-19 in order to elucidate gaps and needs in a timely fashion;
- define a practical plan for deliverables that will address identified needs in order to sustain SARI/ILI surveillance; and
- review and adapt laboratory algorithms to include both influenza and COVID-19.

Additional information can be found in WHO guidance, *Preparing GISRS for the upcoming influenza seasons during the COVID-19 pandemic*. WHO/EMRO is working closely with Member States to support the gaps, needs-analysis and onward planning where necessary.

Update on outbreaks

in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

COVID-19 in 22 EMR countries

Current public health events of concern

[cumulative N° of cases (deaths), CFR %]

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): 2019-2020

Afghanistan	[9998 (216), 2.2%]
Bahrain	[8774 (12), 0.1%]
Djibouti	[2270 (10), 0.4%]
Egypt	[15 786 (707), 4.5%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[133 521 (7359), 5.5%]
Iraq	[4272 (152), 3.6%]
Jordan	[704 (9), 1.3%]
Kuwait	[20 464 (148), 0.7%]
Lebanon	[1097 (26), 2.4%]
Libya	[75 (3), 4%]
Morocco	[7375 (197), 2.7%]
occupied Palestinian territory	[602 (5), 0.8%]
Oman	[7257 (35), 0.5%]
Pakistan	[52 437 (1101), 2.1%]
Qatar	[42 213 (21), 0%]
Saudi Arabia	[70 161 (379), 0.5%]
Somalia	[1594 (61), 3.8%]
Sudan	[3378 (137), 4.1%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[70 (4), 5.7%]
Tunisia	[1048 (47), 4.5%]
United Arab Emirates	[27 892 (241), 0.9%]
Yemen	[209 (34), 16.3%]