

Current major event

Preparing for the next influenza season during the COVID-19

The threat of an influenza pandemic is ever present. Even with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, influenza surveillance, preparedness and response must continue. As the next influenza season approaches in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), countries are advised to take proactive action by reactivating and maintaining their influenza systems.

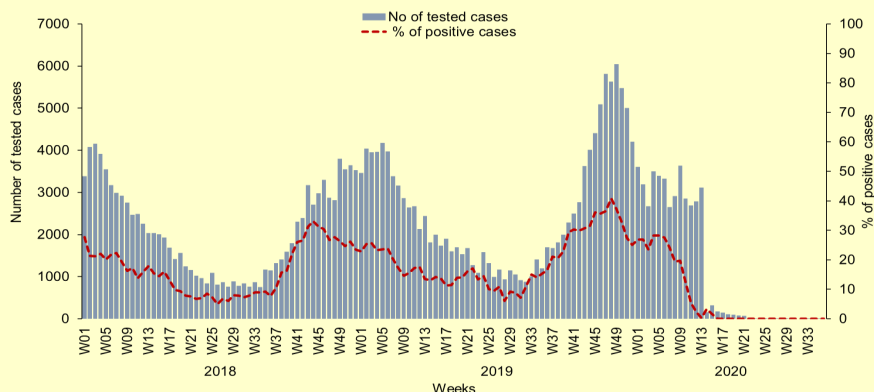
Editorial note

The COVID-19 pandemic has diminished the attention to the threat of influenza globally, particularly as national priorities were rearranged to respond to COVID-19. Accordingly, routine influenza surveillance has been seriously disrupted and the sharing of influenza information and viruses has sharply declined (*see table*).

In the EMR, not only has influenza pandemic preparedness been deprioritized, but resources critical for influenza surveillance (staff, supplies, sentinel hospitals) have been repurposed to COVID-19 response. While this benefited COVID-19 response, it created a strain on the testing and reporting capacities of many countries. Since week 12 this year, a dramatic decline in reporting was observed across the Region (*see graph*). Some factors that may have contributed to that include: sentinel sites were overwhelmed with suspected COVID-19 patients, changes in health care-seeking behaviors and/or health service delivery, repurposed NIC functions to focus SARS-COV-2 testing, limited access to reagents and other supplies and transportation restrictions or reduction of airline services.

WHO has published guidance on operational considerations for leveraging influenza surveillance systems to incorporate COVID-19 testing and is recommending EMR countries to consult the guidance in preparation for the next influenza season (*see link*). This approach advises the use of existing national influenza surveillance systems and public health laboratories for additional support to conduct epidemiological and virologic surveillance for COVID-19. The guidance includes considerations for sentinel sites

Number of tested influenza cases and positivity rate per week in the EMR (2018-2020)



Global indicators of influenza information and virus sharing

Indicator	Change (%)
Number of virus shipments to WHO Collaborating Centers	- 62%
Number of countries reporting to FluNet and/or regional platforms	- 42%
Number of influenza viruses with their sequences uploaded to GISAID	- 94%

on case selection, sampling strategy, sample size, specimen type and transport to testing laboratories. It also includes considerations for national influenza centres (testing laboratories) on the testing algorithm, the laboratory protocol for COVID-19 detection, the COVID-19 external quality assessment programme, and COVID-19 virus sequencing. Moreover, it lists considerations for COVID-19 surveillance data reporting and outputs. Sentinel sites in the EMR are requested to specify the outcome of the COVID-19 test as well when uploading SARI/ILI data to the EMFLU platform.

WHO recommends that Member States take proactive steps towards rapidly reactivating and maintaining influenza sentinel surveillance prior to the start of the next season. This includes maintaining timely reporting through the regional and global platforms and sharing of influenza viruses to the WHO collaborating centres. Member States are also encouraged to maintain routine seasonal influenza immunization programmes and raise awareness about their benefits in reducing excess morbidity and mortality in addition to reducing the pressure on the health care systems, especially during the ongoing pandemic.

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	[37 953 (1385), 3.6%]
Bahrain	[49 038 (183), 0.4%]
Djibouti	[5382 (60), 1.1%]
Egypt	[97 237 (5243), 5.4%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[356 792 (20 502), 5.7%]
Iraq	[201 050 (6353), 3.2%]
Jordan	[1576 (11), 0.7%]
Kuwait	[79 957 (513), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[12 191 (121), 1%]
Libya	[10 437 (188), 1.8%]
Morocco	[50 812 (858), 1.7%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[24 698 (138), 0.6%]
Oman	[83 769 (609), 0.7%]
Pakistan	[292 765 (6235), 2.1%]
Qatar	[116 765 (193), 0.2%]
Saudi Arabia	[306 370 (3619), 1.2%]
Somalia	[3269 (93), 2.8%]
Sudan	[12 903 (803), 6.5%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[2143 (85), 4%]
Tunisia	[2738 (68), 2.5%]
United Arab Emirates	[66 617 (372), 0.6%]
Yemen	[1911 (547), 28.6%]