

## Current major event

### Update on SARS-CoV-2 VOCs in EMR and the WHO announcement for simple, easy-to-say labels

To assist with public discussions of variants, WHO convened a group of scientists from the WHO Virus Evolution Working Group, the WHO COVID-19 reference laboratory network, representatives from GISAID, Nextstrain, Pango and other experts from several countries and agencies to consider easy-to-pronounce and non-stigmatising labels for Variants of Interest and Variants of Concern of SARS-CoV-2.

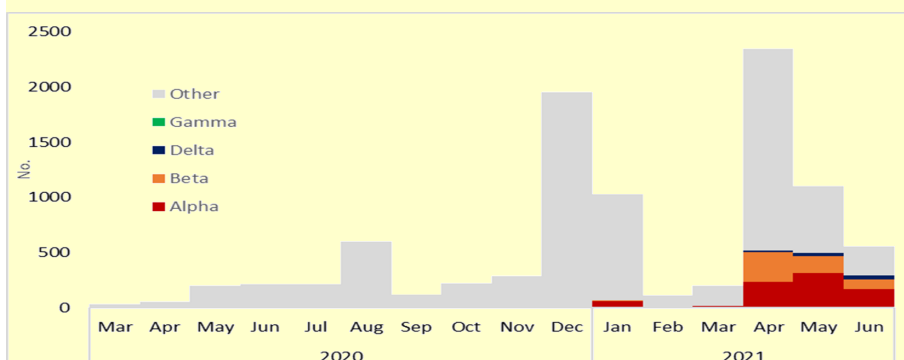
#### Editorial note

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 variants in 2021 posed an increased risk to global public health hence prompting the characterization of specific Variants of Interest (VOIs) and Variants of Concern (VOCs), in order to prioritize global monitoring and research, and ultimately to inform the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Originally, the variants were labelled with scientific names which were difficult to say and recall and were prone to misreporting. As a result, people often resorted to calling variants by the places where they were first detected, which was stigmatizing and discriminatory.

To avoid this and to simplify public communications, WHO assigned simple, easy-to-say and remember labels for key variants of SARS-CoV-2, using letters of the Greek alphabet. However, these labels do not replace existing scientific names, which convey important scientific information and will continue to be used in research. The new WHO labelling of VOCs is as follows: Alpha for B.1.1.7, Beta for B.1.351, Gamma for B.1.1.28 or P.1, and Delta for B.1.617.2 as detected by sequencing.

Currently, 14 out of the 22 countries of the Region have genome sequencing capacities to detect and monitor new variants, while WHO has been facilitating the shipment of samples from 8 countries with no genome sequencing capacity to two regional reference labs in Oman and United Arab Emirates, in addition to other internal reference laboratories.

### Distribution of sequenced SARS-CoV-2 samples by month of submission, EMR, 19 June 2021 (n=9224)



Graph 1

Source: GISAID at <https://www.gisaid.org/hcov19-variants/>

### SARS-CoV-2 VOCs, Global and EMR (Table 1)

WHO Label	Pango Lineage	# Countries Global	# countries in EMR
Alpha	B.1.1.7	172	19
Beta	B.1.351	120	12
Gamma	B.1.1.28 (P.1)	72	3
Delta	B.1.617.2	96	11

There has been an increase of reported VOCs in the Region from January to June 2021 (see graph 1). So far, 19 out of the 22 countries in the Region have reported Alpha (B.1.1.7), 12 countries Beta (B.1.351), 3 countries Gamma (B.1.1.28) and 11 countries Delta (B.1.617.2) VOCs (see table 1). United Arab Emirates reported the Delta VOC on 28 June 2021, attributing it to 30% of COVID-19 cases.

The recent surge in cases and deaths in Afghanistan has been attributed to the Delta VOC. The Ministry of Health in Oman reported on the circulation of 3 VOCs but only the Alpha VOC was reported to global databases, and the rapid spread of COVID-19 in Tunisia has been attributed to the Delta VOC. WHO will continue to build the Region's sequencing capacities to detect variants and to monitor changes to the virus to identify significant mutations and inform countries on required control measures in a timely manner.

### 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): 2019-2021

Afghanistan	[80 841 (3187), 3.9%]
Bahrain	[249 582 (1091), 0.4%]
Djibouti	[11 556 (154), 1.3%]
Egypt	[267 171 (15 309), 5.7%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[2 960 751 (80 941), 2.7%]
Iraq	[1 221 678 (16 518), 1.4%]
Jordan	[739 319 (9516), 1.3%]
Kuwait	[315 900 (1794), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[541 423 (7758), 1.4%]
Libya	[187 281 (3143), 1.7%]
Morocco	[521 195 (9173), 1.8%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[338 694 (3784), 1.1%]
Oman	[222 799 (2401), 1.1%]
Pakistan	[932 140 (21 265), 2.3%]
Qatar	[218 455 (566), 0.3%]
Saudi Arabia	[456 562 (7440), 1.6%]
Somalia	[14 729 (773), 5.2%]
Sudan	[36 004 (2697), 7.5%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[24 639 (1790), 7.3%]
Tunisia	[355 732 (12980), 3.6%]
United Arab Emirates	[581 197 (1696), 0.3%]
Yemen	[6780 (1325), 19.5%]