World Health Organization
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE Eastern Mediterranean

Weekly Epidemiological Monitor

ISSN 2224-4220

Volume 14; Issue no 31; 1 August 2021

Current major event

The SARS-CoV-2 Delta Variant of Concern

The SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant of concern (VOC) has become the virus' predominant strain in some countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), contributing to the Region's fourth wave of COVID-19, at a time of relaxation of public health and social measures (PHSMs) in some countries, and inequitable vaccine distribution.

Editorial note

Globally, 132 countries have reported the detection of the Delta VOC as of 27 July 2021. As of 20 July, 9% of SARS-CoV-2 sequences submitted to GISAID were confirmed as the Delta VOC. According to GISAID data, the prevalence of the Delta VOC among the specimens sequenced over the past four weeks preceding 20 July exceeded 75% in many countries worldwide including Australia, Bangladesh, Botswana, China, Denmark, India, Indonesia, Israel, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Singapore, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

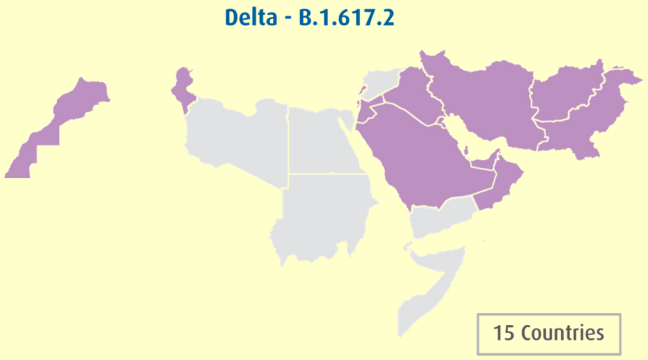
Fifteen countries in the EMR have reported the detection of the Delta VOC as of 26 July 2021 (*see map*). This SARS-CoV-2 variant is of concern for two main reasons: first, growing evidence supports the increased transmissibility of the Delta VOC. The circulation of the Delta is typically observed by a surge in cases, which could be particularly devastating in fragile, conflict, and vulnerable countries/settings with weak health systems and pre-existing vulnerabilities. Based on its estimated transmission advantage, the Delta VOC is expected to become the dominant variant circulating the worldwide. New evidence tends to show an increased risk of hospitalization (disease severity) and a reduction in neutralizing activity (risk of reinfection). More unvaccinated young people are getting infected with the Delta VOC with severe symptoms and a higher hospitalization rate. Thankfully, no impact on diagnostics has been observed to date.

Full vaccination should be administered, as reduced efficacy was observed with incomplete vaccination (one dose only for two-dose vaccines). While available vaccines are still effective in preventing serious illnesses and deaths, countries need to implement effective public health and social measures to complement the vaccine. To increase the impact of vaccination on the evolution of the pandemic, a high vaccination coverage is needed. As of last week, only 41 million people, or 5.5% of the Region's population in EMR, were fully vaccinated. 40% of the vaccine doses administered in the Region are used in high income countries which hold only 8% of the population. Until and unless vaccination coverage is increased equitably, the virus will continue to circulate and new variants will emerge.

However, countries need to adopt a risk-based approach taking into account a number of other factors, including circulating variants, case incidence rates, health system capacity and the capacity to respond. Countries, including those with a high vaccination coverage, need to prepare for the worst as delta is spreading faster. Until high vaccination coverage is attained everywhere, public health and social measures identified as effective should be maintained, such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and limiting mass gatherings and gatherings in closed and crowded settings. Recent modelling studies show that these interventions can considerably reduce the chance of a further surge in infections related to the Delta or other VOCs.

The WHO strategy to suppress transmission and stop the spread of SARS-CoV-2 variants is to reduce the amount of transmission to such a low level that it can be managed by the health system and capacity in place. This is possible with equitable vaccine distribution and high vaccination coverage, along with the implementation of adapted and effective PHSMs.

Countries reporting the detection of the Delta VOC in the EMR, as of 26 July 2021



Afghanistan,
Bahrain,
the Islamic Republic of Iran,
Iraq,
Jordan,
Kuwait,
Lebanon,
Morocco,
Oman,
the occupied Palestinian territory,
Pakistan,
Qatar,
Saudi Arabia,
Tunisia and
the United Arab Emirates.

Key Issues on Delta

- Dominant strain globally
- More aggressive and much more transmissible (60%) than previously circulating strains
- Spread rapidly across the world and poses a particular threat in places where vaccination rates remain low
- Recorded high rates of community transmission in many parts of the world
- Higher viral shedding
- Highly contagious as the original virus.
- WHO approved vaccines, appear to maintain higher effectiveness against the Delta variant
- Vaccination is likely to slow the spread of all the variants

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	[147 985 (6774), 4.6%]
Bahrain	[269 186 (1384), 0.5%]
Djibouti	[11 651 (156), 1.3%]
Egypt	[284 262 (16 524), 5.8%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[3 871 008 (90 630), 2.3%]
Iraq	[1 626 599 (18657), 1.1%]
Jordan	[770 712 (10032), 1.3%]
Kuwait	[397 831 (2320), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[561 380 (7906), 1.4%]
Libya	[253 436 (3548), 1.4%]
Morocco	[623 528 (9785), 1.6%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[345 702 (3872), 1.1%]
Oman	[296 570 (3836), 1.3%]
Pakistan	[1 034 837 (23 422), 2.3%]
Qatar	[226 239 (601), 0.3%]
Saudi Arabia	[525 730 (8237), 1.6%]
Somalia	[15 403 (811), 5.3%]
Sudan	[37 138 (2776), 7.5%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[25 963 (1914), 7.4%]
Tunisia	[595 532 (20 067), 3.4%]
United Arab Emirates	[680 858 (1949), 0.3%]
Yemen	[7061 (1375), 19.5%]