

Current major event

Challenges for upcoming influenza season in Eastern Mediterranean

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean held a regional meeting with the Directors of National Influenza Laboratories (NICs) and other national influenza laboratories from countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) to discuss current challenges and opportunities for maintaining and strengthening existing influenza surveillance as well as monitoring the (co-)circulation of influenza and SARS-CoV-2.

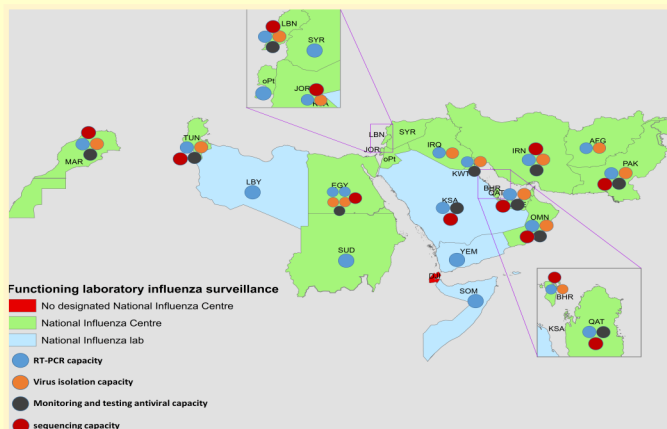
Editorial note

The virtual meeting of Directors of NICs was held on 15th July 2021 with representatives from WHO Collaborating Centres (WHO CC), partners and other global experts to discuss and present the latest guidance, updates and techniques for virological surveillance of influenza, SARS-CoV-2 and other respiratory viruses of pandemic potential. The objectives of the meeting were to: 1) identify and discuss current challenges in detection, characterization of influenza/other emerging respiratory viruses and share new laboratory techniques and methodologies, 2) discuss and agree on ways to strengthen consistent and timely influenza data reporting, virus-sharing and data utilization in the region, 3) discuss and agree on ways to expedite the integration of surveillance of influenza and SARS-CoV-2 from detection to sequencing, 4) critically analyze and evaluate current knowledge on influenza virology, WHO tools, detection and characterization methods for influenza/respiratory viruses, approaches to implementing antigenic and genetic characterization and anti-viral resistance surveillance, and external quality assessment.

Data generated from NICs are used to monitor influenza activity, identify the common circulating influenza sub-types, detection of new novel influenza viruses and finally the vaccine development.

The meeting provided an opportunity to review the status of NICs in the region and ways that can be strengthened through collaboration and information-sharing among countries, and identify gaps, suggest possible solutions and formulate plans for 2021/2022 in strengthening and

Status of influenza laboratory capacity in EMR (June 2021)



Key Recommendations

- NICs and other influenza laboratories are advised to implement/continue to test both influenza and SARS-CoV-2 by using multiplex test kits for influenza and SARS-CoV-2 based on WHO recommended algorithm;
- WHO recommends to collect and test 150 clinical specimens (at least 50 to 100 samples) per week from sentinel sites and test them for both influenza & SARS-CoV-2;
- Timely sharing of representative influenza specimens to WHO CC for influenza candidate vaccine viruses (CVVs);
- NICs should report timely and consistently to FluNet /EMFLU.

maintaining sentinel surveillance and laboratory capacity for the detection of influenza, SARS-CoV-2 and other respiratory viruses. WHO collaborating centres and partners contributed to the discussion and shared the challenges faced by the influenza surveillance system during the pandemic. However, the meeting representatives acknowledged the importance of re-activating and scaling up the virological surveillance and advocating the integration of surveillance for influenza, SARS-CoV-2 and other common emerging respiratory diseases.

NICs and other national influenza laboratories faced numerous challenges in maintaining the routine influenza surveillance during the COVID-19 pandemic due to prioritization of SARS-CoV-2 testing, repurposing of influenza laboratory staff, shortage of supplies, and limited functionality of sentinel sites amongst others. There is urgent need to keep influenza activities/capacities up and running during COVID-19 pandemic and extend for other respiratory viruses.

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	[153 148 (7116), 4.6%]
Bahrain	[272 246 (1388), 0.5%]
Djibouti	[11 728 (157), 1.3%]
Egypt	[287 644 (16 714), 5.8%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[4 895 448 (105901), 2.2%]
Iraq	[1 868 352 (20632), 1.1%]
Jordan	[794 350 (10368), 1.3%]
Kuwait	[409 363 (2416), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[599 298 (8040), 1.3%]
Libya	[305 793 (4184), 1.4%]
Morocco	[849 532 (12361), 1.5%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[365 009 (3937), 1.1%]
Oman	[302 029 (4056), 1.3%]
Pakistan	[1 152 481 (25604), 2.2%]
Qatar	[232 187 (602), 0.3%]
Saudi Arabia	[543 796 (8526), 1.6%]
Somalia	[17 210 (953), 5.5%]
Sudan	[37 708 (2791), 7.4%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[27 539 (1998), 7.3%]
Tunisia	[662 752 (23430), 3.5%]
United Arab Emirates	[715 394 (2036), 0.3%]
Yemen	[7751 (1450), 18.7%]