

Current major event

Influenza virus activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020–2021

Influenza virus activity (percentage positive) was lower during 2020 (12.1%) and 2021 as of week 39 (2.9%) compared to 2017–2019 (range: 20.3%–23.9%), although a steady increase in influenza virus detection has been observed from week 33 of 2021 (*see figure*). The number of countries reporting influenza surveillance data to WHO through EMFLU also decreased from 19 in 2019 to 17 in 2021, and the number of specimens tested annually for influenza viruses decreased from 79 029–137 511 during 2017–2019 to 29 192 during 2021 as of week 39.

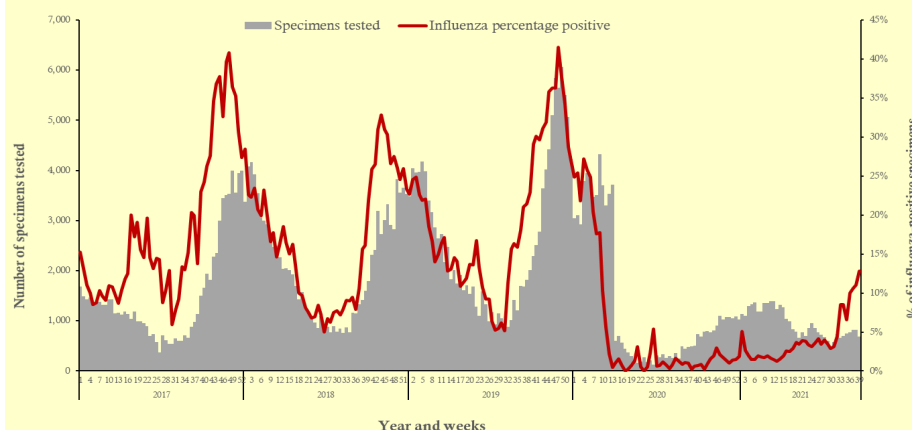
Editorial note

Every year, seasonal influenza is responsible for a substantial burden on public health through hospitalizations and deaths, as well as on economic activity worldwide. Influenza surveillance is key to continuously monitor circulating influenza virus strains and to detect and monitor the emergence of new influenza viruses with pandemic potential. Global influenza surveillance is coordinated by WHO under the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS).

Influenza virus circulation in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) occurs mainly from October to March with peak activities observed from November to January. Influenza B dominated in the 2020/2021 influenza season (54.5%) and influenza A (H3N2) dominated during the second half of 2021 as of week 39 (69.6%) (*see table*). The intensity of influenza virus circulation during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), as detected through influenza sentinel surveillance in the EMR, was lower than that observed in pre-pandemic years (2017–2019) (*see graph*). This phenomenon has been observed globally and it has been attributed mainly to the effect of public health and social measures implemented to reduce the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which, in return, also impacted the circulation of other respiratory pathogens, including influenza.

The impact of lowered exposure and associated immunity to influenza viruses during 2020–2021 on the intensity and severity of subsequent annual epidemics is unknown and warrants close monitoring. Whereas the number of specimens tested for influenza remained low in countries of the Region as of week 39 of 2021, the percentage of influenza positive cases started to increase

Influenza surveillance in the EMR, EMFLU, 2017–2021 (W39)



Influenza type/subtype, in the EMR, EMFLU, 2017–2021 (W39)

Season	Influenza types/subtypes no. (%)			
	A(H1N1) pdm09	A(H3N2)	B	Total (typed/subtyped)
2017/18	14 185 (57.9%)	4051 (16.5%)	6245 (15.6%)	24 481
2018/19	7791 (42.9%)	5580 (30.7%)	4780 (26.4%)	18 151
2019/20	9146 (49.4%)	2433 (13.1%)	6946 (27.5%)	18 525
2020/21	37 (4.2%)	362 (41.3%)	477 (54.5%)	876
2021 (W27–W39)	9 (1.4%)	449 (69.6%)	187 (29.0%)	645

from week 33 (*see figure*). This may be attributed to the progressive easing of COVID-19 control measures potentially resulting in increased co-circulation of influenza and SARS-CoV-2 in forthcoming months.

Epidemiological and virological surveillance of influenza remains key to monitor the levels of virus circulation intensity and severity in the coming period. Furthermore, the integration of SARS-CoV-2 testing within influenza sentinel surveillance systems will help assess the effects of the interaction between influenza and SARS-CoV-2. Such integration is being promoted by the WHO initiative on the use of GISRS to monitor other respiratory viruses with epidemic and pandemic potential, called GISRS+. The use of influenza vaccines is recommended to prevent influenza-associated illness during the potentially forthcoming influenza season.

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	[155 287 (7212), 4.6%]
Bahrain	[275 175 (1389), 0.5%]
Djibouti	[12 881 (169), 1.3%]
Egypt	[306 030 (17 399), 5.7%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[5 611 700 (120 880), 2.2%]
Iraq	[2 007 227 (22 344), 1.1%]
Jordan	[825 245 (10 736), 1.3%]
Kuwait	[411 731 (2451), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[625 445 (8341), 1.3%]
Libya	[341 839 (4686), 1.4%]
Morocco	[934 828 (14 315), 1.5%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[436 136 (4400), 1%]
Oman	[303 813 (4098), 1.3%]
Pakistan	[1 249 858 (27 866), 2.2%]
Qatar	[236 834 (606), 0.3%]
Saudi Arabia	[547 221 (8722), 1.6%]
Somalia	[19 980 (1111), 5.6%]
Sudan	[38 345 (2876), 7.5%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[34 696 (2265), 6.5%]
Tunisia	[708 203 (24 934), 3.5%]
United Arab Emirates	[736 524 (2100), 0.3%]
Yemen	[9139 (1734), 19%]