



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

Public health
Health security

General Working Group of the Health Security Committee Meeting

Wednesday, 17 January 2024 – 11:00-13:00

Summary Report

Chair: Head of Unit, European Commission, DG SANTE B2

Participants: AT, BE, CY, CZ, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, SE, SI, SK, IS, LI, NO, DG SANTE, DG ECHO, DG HERA, RTD, EMA, ECDC

EU/EEA only

Agenda points

1. Introduction
2. Update on respiratory diseases after the Christmas break and holiday season
3. Epidemiological update from Spain
4. Data coverage for vaccination uptake for COVID-19 influenza and respiratory syncytial virus
5. Information on Aedes aegypti at Gran Canaria Island
6. Update on the Implementation of Articles 7 and 8 of Regulation (EU) 2022/2371
7. Overview of the “Research Perspectives on the Health Impacts of Climate Change” conference
8. AOB
9. Conclusion

Key messages:

1. Introduction

This was a first meeting of the General Working Group of the Health Security Committee in 2024. The focus of the meeting was on the respiratory infections.

DG SANTE emphasised the importance of the HSC’s role in the current situation, where several respiratory infections are circulating in parallel (due to the SARS-CoV-2, RSV, influenza virus and Mycoplasma pneumoniae), to coordinate the Member States’ (MS) approach to avoid escalation of the situation and a serious burden to public health and pressure on health care systems. Media reports rather serious situations in certain MS that are supported by ECDC’s data. DG SANTE emphasized that it is time to fully implement measures collectively identified in past years by ECDC, EC and WHO (surveillance, antiviral treatments and vaccination guidelines, preparedness, strong hygiene measures etc).

DG SANTE stressed activities undertaken on the EU level to prepare for the autumn/winter surge of respiratory infections. These include Commissioner Kyriakides’ letter of September 2023 to Ministers

of Health where the importance of surveillance, vaccination, increasing capacity of intensive care units (ICU) and guidance provided by ECDC regarding surveillance, vaccination and public health measures were highlighted.

In view of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), it is also important to remind prescribers about the need to use antibiotics prudently. Given the rise in cases, and given past shortages of medicines, it was stressed that countries should be ready with the medicines needed to treat those infections.

DG SANTE will launch a survey on public health measures and efforts and strongly encouraged countries to submit their answers. Likewise, continued vaccination efforts are key as well as risk communication campaigns reminding about infection control measures.

While surveillance of respiratory diseases is strongly promoted and improving, several gaps persist. Testing and sequencing as well as the development of well designed, representative sentinel surveillance systems is still lacking in certain countries. DG SANTE recalled the webinars to support the preparation of the application for the direct grants to MS for improving national surveillance systems. The next webinar is planned on 6 February 2024.

2. Update on respiratory diseases after the Christmas break and holiday season

ECDC reminded about the integrated surveillance of influenza, RSV and SARS-CoV-2 viruses ([Operational considerations for respiratory virus surveillance in Europe](#)). The SARS-CoV-2 and RSV infections showed an increase in testing positivity since the summer at EU/EEA level up to week 49 (04 December-10 December 2023) and decrease since week 50. (11 December-17 December 2023). The variant of interest (VOI) rising in the last weeks is the BA.2.86, JN.1 remains the most predominant sub-lineage. RSV infections show in recent weeks a mixed epidemiological picture with increasing and decreasing trends at the national level. The highest impact of RSV infections continues to be among children aged 0-4 years. Seasonal influenza epidemic in the EU reporting countries started in week 50 (11 December-17 December 2023) and the activity continues to increase. The positivity rate and SARI (severe acute respiratory infection) case levels are comparable to seasonal epidemics of previous years. Both influenza type A and type B viruses were detected, with a dominance of A(H1N1)pdm09 viruses in sentinel and non-sentinel virological surveillance data.

ECDC's variant classification criteria of circulating SARs-CoV-2, updated in 2023, is aligned with the WHO classification system. Three categories of variant classification are used to communicate increasing levels of concern about new or emerging SARS-CoV-2 variant: variant under monitoring (VUM), variant of interest (VOI) and variant of concern (VOC). ECDC provides weekly updates on variant classifications in the publicly available [Communicable Disease Threat Report](#) and on its [variant web page](#). Variant surveillance data are available as part of the [European Respiratory Virus Surveillance Summary \(ERVISS\)](#). ECDC hosts a cross disciplinary working group that consists of experts from different areas and is tasked to update on variants (Strategic Analysis of Variants in Europe – SAVE). According to the current classification, no variant completes the VOC criteria. A full list of SARS-CoV-2 sub-lineages included for each monitored VOC and VOI displayed in the European Respiratory Virus Surveillance Summary (ERVISS) is available [here](#). Vaccines effectiveness studies show the benefit of vaccination against the circulating variants (specifically BA.2.86) and the new sub-lineages.

ECDC monitors official websites and media as part of its epidemic intelligence activities and has reported an increase in signals related to respiratory illness in the last weeks. COVID-19 and increased activity of influenza over holiday period are the focus. However, some media report increased burden on health care that cannot be validated through ERVISS or ECDC/WHO respiratory virus bulletins.

During the meeting several countries (AT, FI, BE, CZ, DK, EE, EL, IS, IT, LI, LT, NL, NO, PL, SE) reported on increased pressure on health care systems in relation to respiratory diseases and the indicators used to assess it. The epidemiological situation is similar to previous years for most of the countries with an increase the last weeks but the situation being manageable.

3. Epidemiological update from Spain

Spain presented its Integrated sentinel Respiratory Surveillance (SiVIRA) system as a tool for acute respiratory infections surveillance. It is used since 2020 and based on sentinel ARI (acute respiratory infection) surveillance in primary care and sentinel SARI (severe acute respiratory infection) surveillance in hospitals. The influenza rates are higher than in previous seasons post COVID-19. These rates have reached the peak in primary care, but hospitalisations continue to increase and are expected to slow down in week 4 (22 January-28 January 2024). The comparison with pre-pandemic seasons is difficult because the case definition for ARI in the sentinel system implemented is much more sensitive now than the one used before the COVID-19 pandemic when only influenza was monitored. However, preliminary data show that the intensity of influenza activity is like the previous pre-COVID-19 seasons with high circulation of flu virus. The SARS-Cov-2 and RSV data are comparable to other countries with a decrease of positivity rate and hospitalisation rates.

4. Data coverage for vaccination uptake for COVID-19 influenza and respiratory syncytial virus

ECDC presented interim data (01 September 2023 - 15 January 2024) of the COVID-19 vaccination coverage in the EU/EEA that show a heterogeneous picture across the 24 reporting countries. The median vaccination coverage among individuals aged 60 years and older was 11.1%. For persons 80 years and older, the median coverage was 16.3%. Comirnaty Omicron XBB.1.5 (Pfizer BioNTech) vaccine represents 97% of total 22.7 million vaccine doses administered in the EU/EEA. Variation in data collection and databases for COVID-19 versus influenza vaccination at country level is present, resulting in different timeliness and consolidation of the data from the side of ECDC.

Ten countries (DK, CZ, EL, FR, NL, LT, LV, IE, PL, SE) indicated that there are no RSV vaccination campaigns or this topic is still under discussion.

5. Information on Aedes aegypti at Gran Canaria Island

Spain reported three events between November 2023 and January 2024 where Aedes Aegypti adult mosquito specimen in the area close to the main port of Gran Canaria Island. This might be due to recent introductions linked to cruises in the Canary Islands. Public Health measures have been taken and surveillance has been reinforced. DG SANTE reminded that under the EU Health Program, a project will be launched with the International Atomic Agency regarding the use of sterile insect techniques in Cyprus. MS interested on this project are invited to contact the HSC secretariat.

6. Update on the Implementation of Articles 7 and 8 of Regulation (EU) 2022/2371

According to Article 7 of Regulation (EU) 2022/2371 EU/EEA countries need to provide the Commission and relevant Union agencies and bodies with an updated report on prevention, preparedness and response planning and implementation at national level every three years. By the legal deadline **27 December 2023**, **29 countries** submitted their first report. Article 7 reporting template consists of two sections: International Health Regulations (IHR) capacities and additional capacities. Countries submitted the latest **IHR States Parties Self-Assessment Annual Report 2022** and links to the **Tripartite AMR Country Self-assessment Survey – TrACSS**. The ECDC will assess the data and prepare a non-public report that will be used to initiate discussions in the HSC as per the Regulation, and as

baseline for the forthcoming assessment under Article 8 and next reporting cycles to follow-up on progress and gaps.

ECDC gave an update on the status of the Article 8 on mission planning for the first cycle of assessments in EU MS. The documents are being developed and a tentative schedule for 2024, starting in May until Q3 2026, is being put in place. The timelines have been proposed to the countries. Currently ECDC is waiting for the confirmation of remaining countries.

7. Overview of the “Research Perspectives on the Health Impacts of Climate Change” conference

This high-level conference will take place on 19-20 February in Brussels. The focus is on climate change, international initiatives, health research, identification of the gaps and implementation of a comprehensive Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA). The aim is to launch the roadmap for the SRIA addressing climate change and health. An exhibition space is open to accommodate up to 50 posters (the [call is](#) open until Friday 19 January). Participants can register for a physical attendance until 12 February or attend a live streaming. The provisional agenda is available on [Research Perspectives on the Health Impacts of Climate Change - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

8. AOB – State of Health Preparedness Report 2023

On 15 December 2023, the Commission adopted its yearly State of Health Preparedness Report to map EU actions taken since the pandemic to address cross-border health threats. The report is available on [State of Health Preparedness Report 2023 - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

9. AOB – HSC opinion on zoonotic avian influenza

The HSC adopted the HSC opinion on avian influenza on 19 December 2023 and it is available on [Publications - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#). The text of the opinion will also be presented to the PAFF (The Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed) committee on 23 January 2024 to address several aspects raised by the MS specifically related to the animal side.

10. Conclusion

- a. DG SANTE reiterated recommendations and guidance available at EU level to respond to the autumn/winter surge of respiratory infections, stressing the importance for EU and EEA countries to act in order to avoid overburdening health care systems.
- b. The overall epidemiological situation in respiratory infections is like previous years for most of the countries with an increase in the last weeks (specifically for influenza), however it seems currently manageable for health care systems.
- c. DG SANTE will share with a survey on public health measures to respond to the current challenges posted by the respiratory infections and strongly encourages all countries to participate.
- d. On 23 January DG SANTE will present the HSC opinion on zoonotic avian influenza to the PAFF committee.
- e. Webinars are organised to support the preparation of the application for the direct grants to MS for improving national surveillance systems. The next webinar is on 6 February 2024. The deadline for submission of proposals is 29 February 2024.
- f. A senior level HSC online meeting will take place on 25 January 2024.