



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

Public health
Health Security

Luxembourg, 02 February 2022

Health Security Committee

Audio meeting on the outbreak of COVID-19

Summary Report

Chair: Head of Unit, European Commission, DG SANTE C3

Audio participants: AT, BE, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HU, HR, IE, IT, LT, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, SE, SK, NO, CH, UK, AD, BA, RS, SM ,DG SANTE, DG MOVE, DG ECHO, HERA, COUNCIL, ECDC, EMA, WHO

EU/EEA countries and observers

Agenda points:

1. Omicron and update – presentation by ECDC
2. Changing dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic – adaptations of COVID-19 measures – presentation by MS
3. G7 Health: Germany's G7 Presidency 2022 – presentation by Germany

Key messages:

1. Omicron and update – presentation by ECDC

On 23 January 2022, the overall epidemiological situation in the EU/EEA was characterised by a very high overall case notification rate that has been increasing rapidly in the past five weeks and has had an elevated but stable death rate. An epidemiological situation of high or very high concern was observed in 27 EU/EEA Member States. Vaccination coverage in the targeted population is 81.5% and results demonstrate it is effective against preventing severe disease and death. Vaccination coverage in the total population is 70.1%, which remains insufficient to stop transmission. Omicron has become the dominant variant, overall accounting for 83.3% of the sequenced samples, compared to 69.4% the previous week. The WHO and the ECDC include the BA.2 sub-lineage within the Omicron variant. More than 66% of the BA.2 sub-lineage is reported from Denmark. To date, there is no available data indicating a difference between the BA.2 and the BA.1 with regard to disease severity, vaccine effectiveness or risk of reinfections.

IE asked if ECDC is able to share any information regarding a BA.1 infection protecting against a BA.2 infection. At this stage, the **ECDC** is not able to respond to this question, but will check with other colleagues to see if such information is available.

2. Changing dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic – adaptations of COVID-19 measures – presentation by MS

As several Member States are lifting COVID-19 related measures in their countries, the Commission invited several Member States to provide a short update on the current measures in place. Overall, testing remains a priority in many countries, along with reaching a high COVID-19 vaccination coverage. Most countries reported a high case notification rate, but this is not paired with extremely high numbers of COVID-19 cases in the intensive care units/hospitals. Few countries mentioned the absence from work of hospital staff due to the high COVID-19 positivity rate.

IE presented the changing dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic and the adaptation of COVID-19 measures in their country. As of 20 January 2022, the Irish National Public Health Emergency Team advised that given the profile of the disease in IE and the available evidence and experience of Omicron internationally allowed for a fundamental shift in management of COVID-19. This decision was supported by the clear decoupling of cases with ICU admissions and deaths experienced in the Omicron wave, as well as the high vaccination coverage in the country. Consequently, several restrictions related to COVID-19 were lifted on 21 January 2022. Mask wearing will be lifted/revised by 28 February. Measures that will remain in place include the COVID-19 pass for international travel, as well as self-isolation and testing for symptomatic individuals. IE is currently focusing on, among other things, the completion of primary and booster vaccination, flexible and adaptable testing strategies and comprehensive surveillance.

In **BG**, more than 40 000 tests were performed (PCR/Antigen) in the last 24 hours (from 01 February to 02 February), with 11 000 new cases detected (25% positivity rate). About 500 patients with COVID-19 are currently admitted in intensive care units - most patients are between the ages of 30 and 60 years old. BG is struggling with a high incidence rate among hospital staff, leading to staff shortages. The overall vaccination coverage in BG is low - about 30% of the population is fully vaccinated. Measures taken in the latest Omicron wave include 50% online lessons for schools and a RAT test for children and staff at least once a week. The EU COVID Digital Certificate is in place and BG has reduced the opening hours for facilities and restaurants. Masks are mandatory in indoor spaces. BG is currently working on a new national plan.

DK presented its latest epidemiological status. As of February 2022, COVID-19 is no longer considered critical for society; and all general restrictions have been lifted. Recommendations on vaccination, isolation, social distancing, ventilation and hygiene remain in place. COVID-19 testing, vaccine certificates and mask wearing will continue to be used in long-term care facilities and hospitals. DK moved away from restrictions for the whole population to focus on the at-risk populations. DK expects to see an increase in cases but believes it has the capacity to handle this.

WHO asked DK if the wearing of masks is no longer allowed. **DK** responded that it is no longer mandatory, individuals are encouraged to wear a mask on a voluntary basis.

HR asked DK about mask mandates in public institutions and schools. **DK** responded that mask mandates in schools were never in place. Public institutions may require the wearing of masks or a COVID-19 certificate..

AT asked how DK will deal with maintaining critical infrastructure if many new cases arise and patients need to isolate. Alongside lifting restrictions, **DK** introduced new recommendation on isolation. Isolation is required once tested positive, and when experiencing symptoms associated with COVID-19.

HR asked if DK quarantines children that have been in close contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case. **DK** mentioned that the same requirements apply to everyone.

SE presented the current COVID-19 measures in place. SE reported high number of cases, but less pronounced increase in serious outcomes. Current recommendations in place for individuals include: COVID-19 vaccination; staying alert to COVID-19 symptoms; limiting the number of close contacts; advice to avoid crowding in public transport; use of masks for when it is not possible to avoid crowding; advice on social distancing; guidelines for working from home; special recommendations for those who are not vaccinated; and restrictions and recommendations regarding international travel. Measures for companies and organisations include regulations for public gatherings and public events indoors (distancing measures, vaccination certificates, limited number of participants), control measures for venues serving food and drink (only takeout and seated dining, no dancing, limited opening hours, distancing measures), guidelines for indoor trading establishments, markets, and culture and leisure establishments, guidelines for employers and public transport operators. SE adapted its recommendations regarding testing, isolation and quarantine. SE is currently anticipating to lift some restrictions.

AT presented its current COVID-19 measures. In AT, 72% of the population has completed the primary vaccination, 50% of the population has received a booster dose. On 7 February 2022, the mandatory vaccination law will enter into force for people aged 18 years and older (pregnant women, individuals with a valid recovery certificate and individuals who cannot be vaccinated are exempt). Public security bodies will carry out checks on the compliance with the mandate starting in March 2022. AT is currently working on connecting the central population register with the central vaccination register. Once these two registers are connected, it should automatically identify individuals who do not comply with the vaccination mandate. Monetary fines will be given to individuals who are not vaccinated, AT clarified that no arrests will be carried out.

PL gave a short overview on their current COVID-19 situation. Poland is currently experiencing their fifth wave of COVID-19 (due to the Omicron variant). The detection of Omicron cases is about 50% higher compared to the Delta variant. Currently, one third of the tests are positive. Current isolation rules for the general population is 10 days (for medical staff 5-7 days). Quarantine rules are 7 days for the general population (5 days or every day testing without quarantine for medical staff).

FI mentioned that the current epidemiological situation is similar to SE. FI has detected few cases of the BA.2 sub-lineage. The transmission seems to be as rapid as the BA.1. Testing and tracing capacities are reaching their limit in FI. The number of patients in hospitals is decreasing. FI is focusing towards more symptomatic cases and cases ending up in the hospitals/ intensive care units. The overall vaccination

coverage is around 85%. Half of the population above 18 has received a booster dose. As of 1 February 2022, social healthcare workers are required to be vaccinated. Staff who refuse to get vaccinated will be transferred to other tasks within the facility.

EL is gradually lifting restrictions. As of 1 February 2022, opening hours for food and drink establishments are no longer restricted, only vaccinated and recovered (2G) individuals can enter. Students are following classes in school, and teleworking remains in place. About 70% of the population is fully vaccinated. For travelling, the Passenger Locator Form (PLF) and a negative PCR/RAT test are required.

DE does not observe a dramatic increase in the intensive care unit occupancy. In terms of vaccination coverage, 76% of the population has received a first dose, 74% a second dose, and about 52% a booster dose. The vaccination rate for individuals below 18 years old is quite low but increasing. Masks are required in crowded places. Testing and masks are mandatory in schools. Sports and culture events are open (2G – recovered/vaccinated). Restaurants are open (2G+ – recovered/vaccinated plus a recent test (unless for people who received a booster dose). Some rules especially regarding sports events vary among states (Länder). DE recently launched a new vaccination campaign to increase the vaccination coverage. A vaccination mandate will enter into force for healthcare staff as of 16 March 2022. DE is currently discussing a vaccine mandate for the general population.

The epidemiological situation in **England** is similar to that of DK and SE. In December 2021, England reported the highest case rate ever, about 7% of the entire English population tested positive, numbers have dropped since. The highest overall case burden is now in children below 11 years old, but this number is currently dropping. England noticed very large increases in hospital admissions, but even the case rate was several times higher than in the previous highest peak, the pressure on hospitals was half that that of the previous highest peak. Intensive care requirements remained entirely flat and have now fallen to the lowest intensive care capacity since July 2021. Over the last week, restrictions have been lifted. All settings are open, many office workers are returning to the office. The uptake of a booster dose is now about 86%. Testing remains widely available and isolation remains a primary measures to prevent further spread.

3. G7 Health: Germany's G7 Presidency 2022 – presentation by Germany

Germany presented the G7 Health goals of the German's G7 Presidency for 2022. Key topics to be addressed include: 1) pandemic response and preparedness; 2) climate resilient and sustainable climate-neutral health systems; 3) fighting antimicrobial resistance. The G7 Health Minister's meetings will take place between 19 and 20 May 2022. The G7 summit will take place between 26 and 28 June 2022.