



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

Public health
Health Security

Luxembourg, 11 January 2023

Health Security Committee

Audio meeting on COVID-19

Summary Report

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

Audio participants: AT, BE, BG, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, HU, HR, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, NO, IS, LI, DG SANTE, DG ECHO, DG COMM, DG MOVE, DG HR, SG, HERA, JRC, ECDC, EASA, WHO

Agenda points:

1. Epidemiological update on COVID-19 – presentation by ECDC and WHO
2. Opinion of the Health Security Committee for a common approach in response to the COVID-19 situation in China - Presentation of survey results on state of implementation of HSC Opinion steps
3. Technical protocol for genomic surveillance: "Targeted genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 among travellers in response to a worsening or unknown epidemiological situation in a third country" – Presentation by ECDC
4. Addendum to the EASA/ECDC COVID-19 aviation health safety protocol: "Guidelines in response to the worsening of the COVID-19 epidemiological situation" – presentation by EASA
5. Technical protocol on wastewater screening: "Sampling of aircraft wastewater for SARS-CoV-2 surveillance at airports/aircrafts – presentation by JRC
6. AOB: Survey on mpox launched by ECDC

Main messages:

1. Epidemiological update on COVID-19 – presentation by ECDC and WHO

The **European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)** gave an update on the current COVID-19 pandemic situation. At the end of week 50 (week ending 18 December 2022), the pooled EU/EEA notification rate of COVID-19 cases among people aged 65 years and older increased by 7% compared with the previous week, reaching 43% of the maximum value reported during the pandemic. The impact of this increased transmission is being seen in hospitals. Increased inter-generational mixing during the year-end holiday season likely increased the exposure of vulnerable groups to respiratory viruses. During the holiday period there were changes in reporting, testing, and healthcare-seeking behaviour, which will complicate the interpretation of epidemiological data submitted in the coming weeks. ECDC is planning to do a **full update of country overview report by 13 January 2023**. BQ.1 is the dominant

variant in the EU/EEA. XBB and sub-lineages of BA.2.75 are present in moderate levels. There is currently no indication of circulation of variants associated with differing infection severity compared to BA.5. The ECDC also gave a short overview on the variants circulating in the **United States** (rapid expansion of variant XBB.1.5) and **China** (there is currently no data suggesting emergence of new variants of concern).

The **World Health Organization** (WHO) had shared its perspective on the situation on a global level. WHO is currently in contact with the authorities of **China** and hopes to receive more epidemiological data from the country. The high increasing prevalence of XBB.1.5 in the **United States** (from 15% in November to 40% in December 2022) creates concerns regarding the seemingly quick transmissibility of this variant. WHO flagged the dramatic reduction in sequencing in the **European Region**, highlighting the importance to maintain strong surveillance. Regarding **measures**, WHO mentioned that wearing masks in high risk settings (hospitals, public transportation) that ventilation of crowded public places can have important beneficial impacts and reminded about continuous efforts needed to increase the vaccination rate.

ES asked if there is any reliable information available about the real incidence numbers in China in the last few weeks? This would help to estimate the number of cases in percentage of the population over the last few weeks. The use of mask in transport are important, but ES is one of the only countries where this is still mandatory, this is most likely to change soon. There would be a strong recommendation for mask wearing. **WHO** responded that the information from China that has been shared is representing the situation, there is clearly a big wave of infection going on, resulting also in severe disease. WHO is still trying to get more details about the epidemiological situation.

IE mentioned that they did not receive an invitation for the meeting with China organized by WHO the week before. **WHO** replied that the briefing with China was part of the weekly Member State information session in Geneva, the invitations were shared with all Member States in a standard manner, mentioning that there will be briefing from China, with an opportunity to ask questions. WHO will have a look if information of the meeting can be shared.

WHO: with regards to variant XBB.1.5, WHO does not want to create panic. The variant shows significant transmissibility, but open questions remain to the severity of disease related to this variant. WHO hopes to be able to issue a statement soon.

2. Opinion of the Health Security Committee for a common approach in response to the COVID-19 situation in China - Presentation of survey results on state of implementation of HSC Opinion steps

On 29 December 2022 and 3 January 2023, the HSC discussed the COVID-19 situation in China, resulting in the “Opinion of the Health Security Committee for a common EU approach in response to the COVID-19 situation in China”, published on 5 January 2023. On 4 January 2023, the IPCR (European Council) concluded on a coordinated precautionary approach in the light of COVID-19 developments in China. The Commission ran another HSC survey to assess the state of implementation of the recommended steps in the HSC Opinion in Member States, 24^[1] responses were received. The summary of the results show:

- Out of 23 MS, 10 have direct flights from China. Most EU/EEA countries have indirect flights from China. Also, road transport through neighbouring countries should be considered.

^[1] Including 1 double reporting i.e. 23 countries replied by 11/1 in the morning

- 2 countries (ES, FR) have mandatory mask wearing, 15 other MS recommend to all passengers on flights to and from China to wear a medical mask, or FFP2/N95/KN95 respirators.
- 12 MS are issuing advice regarding personal hygiene and health measures to incoming and outgoing international travellers coming from or destined for China. In addition, 7 MS advice regarding personal hygiene and health measures to aircraft personnel coming from or destined for China or to airport personnel dealing with passenger from or destined for China. 8 countries are using the advice, which the Commission has prepared and translated.
- 11 MS are requiring all passengers departing from china to EU/EEA member states, a negative covid-19 test taken prior to departure from china. Most of them require a RAT or PCR test taken 48 hours before entry to the EU/EEA.
- 7 MS are carrying out random testing of passengers arriving from China on arrival in the EU Member States and are sequencing all positive tests.
- 4 MS are testing and sequencing of wastewater from airports with international flights and/or aircrafts arriving from China. All 4 of them sequence the results. In 8 MS, this is under discussion.
- 16 MS are promoting vaccine sharing and the uptake of vaccines, including booster doses, particularly among vulnerable groups.
- 5 countries have increased the number and representativeness of sentinel sites and increased the number of tests performed in accordance with guidance and support from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).
- 9 MS do additionally carry out the sequencing of hospitalised/ICU cases with a history of recent travel from China and share their results.

The survey remains open for a few more days, as several Member States informed that discussions are/were still ongoing and therefore, could not fill in the survey yet.

DK did not complete the survey yet, as discussions are still ongoing. DK will complete the survey later this week.

FR thanked the Commission for organising this survey, as having an overview of all implementation activities of the Member States is very helpful. In France, all volunteering passengers arriving from China with a final destination of France were screened upon arrival between 1-5 January 2023. Since 5 January 2023, some flights were randomly selected in which all passengers are tested upon arrival. 1 019 Tests were performed on arrival on 14 flights, 172 came back positive (17% positivity rate). Positivity rate of flights from China is decreasing because of the mandatory negative test certificate of less than 48 hours prior boarding since 5 January. Systematic sequencing was carried out on these positive samples, these sequencings showed BA.5.2 sequences, BF.7 sequences, and BQ.1 sequences. FR is currently working on waste water surveillance from aircrafts and will share the data once available.

AT is testing and also sequencing wastewater from aircrafts arriving from China.

EE will plans to have its main focus on wastewater surveillance and increasing vaccination uptake. Recommendations were made regarding personal hygiene etc. Wastewater surveillance from the airport is being set up at the moment. Since there are no direct flights from China, EE cannot implement a negative test requirement. EE will fill in the survey.

PT asked if countries that already have experience with waste water surveillance in stations at or near the airport to share their best practices and challenges. PT has written a set of questions in EWRS. PT

also mentioned that a flight from China arrived on 7 January, 61 passengers were tested, 16 were positive (26% positivity rate). Only one sample is getting further lab investigation. The **Commission** asked what happened to the passengers who were positive. **PT** responded that information was provided, the same as residents in Portugal receive once tested positive: self-isolation for 5 days. No contact tracing has been established at this point - needs further discussion.

LU did not had access to the survey, will still fill it in this week.

DE informed that it performed random test from passengers on 9 January 2023 and all tests were negative.

FI did not complete the survey yet, discussions are still ongoing. **FI** will try to complete the survey by the end of the week. **FI** is recommending masks and hygiene measures to the aircraft personnel. The waste water monitoring is still under discussion.

The **Commission** will circulate the updated version of the PPT showing the survey results to the HSC.

3. Technical protocol for genomic surveillance: "Targeted genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 among travellers in response to a worsening or unknown epidemiological situation in a third country" – Presentation by ECDC

The ECDC gave a presentation on the targeted genomic surveillance in travellers. The practical guidance allows EU/EEA Member States to implement a pilot study for the harmonised and coordinated targeted genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 at selected international points of entry (PoE). Overall objectives for traveller-based targeted genomic surveillance include:

- to provide an early warning for new SARS-CoV-2 variants in order to trigger strengthening of community-based sequencing in EU/EEA countries and to assess their possible growth advantage over already dominant variants, and other characteristics of concern
- to obtain information on the international distribution of SARS-CoV-2 variants based on the distribution of variants detected in travellers, and to contribute to global SARS-CoV-2 variant surveillance
- to determine if a rapidly deteriorating epidemiological situation outside of the EU/EEA may be variant-driven
- to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of targeted genomic surveillance in travellers

Comments are currently collected, the **practical guidance was published on 13 January 2023**.

ECDC calls on countries to express their interest in participating in this study.

HR asked if it is envisaged by protocol to collect any epidemiological data from the travellers randomly tested. **ECDC** responded that currently it is collecting data from the individual travellers that is available.

4. Addendum to the EASA/ECDC COVID-19 aviation health safety protocol: "Guidelines in response to the worsening of the COVID-19 epidemiological situation" – presentation by EASA

The **European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA)** presented the guidelines in response to the worsening of the epidemiological situation: "*Addendum to the [Aviation Health Safety Protocol implementing the IPCR Operational Conclusions](#)*". EASA highlighted the importance for coordinated and proportionate measures to be applied in aviation in response to the current developments in China and potentially applied in other geographical regions in similar settings. Objectives of the guidance include: reducing the likelihood of transmission during air travel; reducing the risk of geographical spread

potential new variants; and facilitating early detection of new variants. Temporary measures targeting flights between China and the EU include:

- pre-departure testing of passengers from (in-)direct flights to the EU;
- medical facemasks on board of the aircraft;
- hygiene measures; enhance cleaning and disinfection of aircrafts;
- random testing of passengers at arrival and sequencing of positive results; and
- monitoring of waste water as an early warning tool to detect new variants.

DE thanked EASA and ECDC for their close cooperation. DE asked if the messages sent to the travellers and airport staff, if these are in line with the messages from the Commission sent the Member States. EASA ensures to work in a harmonised and consistent way, to send out the same messages and understanding. In addition, HERA and JRC were also consulted to ensure their requirements were taken into account, before the guidance document was published.

IS asked if indirect flights are all flights that may have passengers from China on board? The Commission will come back to IS in writing.

5. Technical protocol on wastewater screening: “Sampling of aircraft wastewater for SARS-CoV-2 surveillance at airports/aircrafts – presentation by HERA and JRC

Immediately after the adoption of the HSC guidance document on wastewater surveillance, JRC and HERA started to work on the implementation of the guidance for SARS-CoV-2 surveillance at airports and aircrafts. The guidance is already [published](#) on the JRC website. HERA mentioned that the nominations of competent authorities for the Joint Action on waste water surveillance under the EU4Health Programme 2023 has been launched. The deadline is 13 February 2023.

The **EU Joint Research Centre** (JRC) mentioned that aircraft waste water samplings has been deployed since 7 January 2023 in AT, BE, NL, HU, and DE. In addition, consultations with airport/aircraft companies are ongoing, as well as technical work under the Commission Recommendation’s on National Contact Points, the designing of a conceptual framework to integrate wastewater-based surveillance and clinical data. International coordination meetings are ongoing.

6. AOB: Survey on mpox launched by ECDC

The ECDC will launch a follow up survey to update data on vaccination for mpox in EU/EEA on the 12 January with deadline 27 January 2023. This is a joint data collection carried out also on behalf of HERA countries that received the donation of the vaccines which is part of the donation agreement. The Commission would be grateful if HSC members follow up with the competent national focal points to ensure high participation, as for previous data collection.

The **Commission** informed the HSC that [WHO issued a statement](#) declaring that the Ebola outbreak in Uganda has ended.

The **Commission** closed the meeting by reminding the HSC members to register their representatives for the HSC physical meeting taking place on 24 January 2023.