

Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

Meeting Report

Tuesday 07/03/2023 at 17:00

Commissioner Kyriakides welcomed participants to this online meeting of the EU Scientific Advice Platform, focusing on COVID-19, long-COVID (or post-COVID condition), as well as an update on other potential health threats, including avian influenza.

1. COVID-19 – Epidemiological situation, vaccination and therapeutics update

ECDC explained that the epidemiological picture at the pooled EU/EEA level over the past 12 months since the initial large Omicron peak has been characterised by periodic waves of infection approximately every 2-3 months. There has been a general downward trend in the height of the associated peaks in reported cases, hospitalisation, intensive care admissions and deaths in this period.

By the end of the week ending 5 March 2023, overall, there were no increasing trends in any of the EU/EEA indicators based on pooled country data. There has been a reduction in the number of countries reporting increasing trends, suggesting an overall improvement in the epidemiological situation compared to the previous week.

National experts confirmed that for quite some time, the COVID-19 situation had been stable. The rate of severe disease as well as the rate of hospitalisation remain low. This reflects the vaccine- and infection- induced immunity. Speakers exchanged on the Omicron sub-variant XBB.1.5. This sub-variant is mainly present in the United States and its circulation increases in Europe.

Participants exchanged on their national epidemiological situation with an increased rate of cases reported in 10 Member States, yet a relatively low number of hospitalisations and deaths affecting mainly elderly people. The low rate of hospitalisations and deaths suggest that the population is protected against severe diseases. Hence, the current situation within the EU is not alarming even if the cases are increasing.

Following this intervention, EMA described ongoing preparedness efforts for the next cold season and informed on discussions how to define the composition of the vaccines with other regulators. She discussed the advantages of the mRNA vaccines to swiftly adapt and change their composition. Other vaccine platforms take longer to adapt to new variants. In terms of therapeutics for COVID-19, EMA has recommended declining a marketing authorisation of Molnupiravir, due to the lack of evidence of its efficacy. EMA also touched upon the ongoing monitoring on the adverse side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines, with no new safety signals being picked up despite a very thorough pharmacovigilance.

2. Update on long-COVID

In the second part of this meeting, experts exchanged on the post-COVID-19 condition, also known as long COVID. This term covers COVID-19 patients who continue to have symptoms after 12 weeks since their first infection. Participants stated that there is insufficient awareness of this issue, while according to some estimates, up to 10% of COVID-19 patients can develop long-COVID. The European

DG SANTE presented the Commission work to develop a better understanding of the causes and consequences of long-COVID. Indeed, the Commission has invested over 66 million euros to support large cohort studies on COVID-19 under Horizon Europe. The Commission's Expert Panel on Effective Ways of Investing in Health published a report on "Facing the impact of the post-COVID-19 condition (Long COVID) on health systems" in December 2022. During the same month, a conference took place between the EU and the US about long-COVID with the participation of Professor Piot. The Commission also aims to increase international cooperation and has, therefore, the intention to create a high-level network of expertise. The latter will consist of centres of expertise on the management and treatment of Long-COVID designed by members of the Public Health Expert Group. They will share information and support good practice sharing among healthcare institutions across the EU.

Lastly, several participants acknowledged the added value of conducting multi country clinical trials, and discussed the importance of coordinating ongoing and future projects exist on the issue to be more effective.

3. Other health threats Update on HPAI by the ECDC, DGs SANTE and HERA

The Commission introduced concerns about the wide spread of avian influenza and the potential threat for humans. Participants exchanged about the concerning situation regarding Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) which has been reported among more than thirty species of birds as well as in poultry farms. Reports of infections in mammals such as foxes, ferrets and cats also increase. Transmission to humans remains rare and, up to now, no human-to-human transmission has been identified. The situation remains of concern as the virus is adapting to new species.

Experts exchanged on preparedness, surveillance and response measures in place at national and EU level, both from the animal and human health perspectives, with a One health approach. EMA provided an update on ongoing work regarding vaccines and therapeutics. The Commission debriefed on its work on avian flu, including consultation of the HERA Lab Network, and collaboration with the WHO on the Marburg virus disease outbreak.

Participation

Member States participants:

1. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
2. Professor Alemka MARKOTIĆ (Croatia)
3. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
4. Professor Toivo MAIMETS (Estonia)
5. Professor Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
6. Professor Miklós SZÓCSKA (Hungary)
7. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
8. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
9. Dr Charles MALLIA-AZZOPARDI (Malta)
10. Dr Susan VAN DEN HOF (The Netherlands)
11. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
12. Professor Henrique BARROS (Portugal)
13. Professor Diana PAUN (Romania)
14. Professor Pavol JARCUSKA (Slovak Republic)
15. Fernando SIMÓN (SPAIN)
16. Professor Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)

European Commission:

17. Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner (Chair)
18. Professor Peter Piot, Special Advisor to EU Commission President
19. Giorgos Rossides, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
20. Roberto Reig Rodrigo, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
21. John F. Ryan, Acting Director General, DG SANTE
22. Wolfgang Philipp – Head of Unit, Intelligence Gathering, Analysis and Innovation, HERA
23. Cristina Modoran, Head of Unit, Policy Strategy, DG SANTE
24. Thomas Van Cangh, Deputy Head of Unit, Policy Strategy, DG SANTE
25. Marta Valenciano, Intelligence Analyst - Lead Epidemiologist, Policy Strategy Unit, DG SANTE
26. Sigrid Weiland, Policy Coordinator, Policy Strategy Unit, DG SANTE
27. Edit Szepessy, Policy Officer – Inter-institutional relations, DG SANTE
28. Anne Auffret, Policy Assistant to Director General, HERA
29. Hannah Herzig, HERA
30. Ornella Martinello, Secretariat General
31. Georgina Hadjifrangiskou, Stagiare - Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
32. Caranina Colpaert, Stagiare - Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
33. Lucile Bertaux, Stagiaire - DG SANTE

ECDC:

34. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist
35. Cornelia Adlhoch, Principal expert

EMA:

36. Emer Cooke – Executive Director