

FLU FOCUS

Information and resources on influenza in the WHO European Region



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From the WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) - <http://www.euro.who.int/>

Flu Focus is an e-magazine published by the WHO Regional Office for Europe that covers recent developments, research, reports, materials and resources on influenza. *Flu Focus* provides updates on influenza and spotlights key features that the WHO Regional Office for Europe would like to bring to your attention. It is sent on a regular basis throughout the influenza season (week 40 – week 20 in the following year).

We hope that you will consider this e-magazine as a channel through which to share information across the Region. *Flu Focus* welcomes new knowledge and experiences in influenza responses – such as your case studies, strategic thinking, supporting material and any other relevant documentation. Please contact influenza@euro.who.int if you wish to submit something for a future issue.

This issue of *Flu Focus* will be available shortly on the WHO Regional Office for Europe Web site at <http://www.euro.who.int/flufocus> in both English and Russian.

Этот выпуск *Flu Focus* будет также вскоре помещен на сайте Европейского регионального бюро ВОЗ: <http://www.euro.who.int/flufocus> на английском и русском языках.

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Issue No.5 Summary

At the conclusion of the 2011-2012 influenza season, this issue of Flu Focus offers an overview of the season and highlights the main events and activities that took place during the season. These included several meetings, workshops and missions held around the European Region on topics ranging from the revision of pandemic preparedness plans to influenza surveillance. This issue also provides information about WHO recommendations for the composition of influenza vaccine for the 2012-2013 influenza season in the northern hemisphere, as well as new SAGE recommendations on seasonal influenza vaccine. It shares information about upcoming meetings and provides a list of peer-reviewed publications produced by the influenza programme at WHO/Europe in recent months.

We would like to thank the Member States, our WHO collaborating centres, our partner organization ECDC and the many experts who contribute to the work of WHO/Europe who made this publication possible.

TOPICAL FEATURES

1. Overview of 2011-2012 influenza season in the WHO European Region

The 2011-2012 influenza season began late and was mild compared with recent years. Most countries in the Region reported lower ILI and ARI consultation rates and fewer virological influenza detections in comparison with previous seasons. The season was largely dominated by influenza A(H3N2) virus in contrast to the 2010-2011 season, where A(H1N1)pdm09 was the dominant virus circulating. Resistance to the antivirals oseltamivir and zanamivir was not detected in this season.

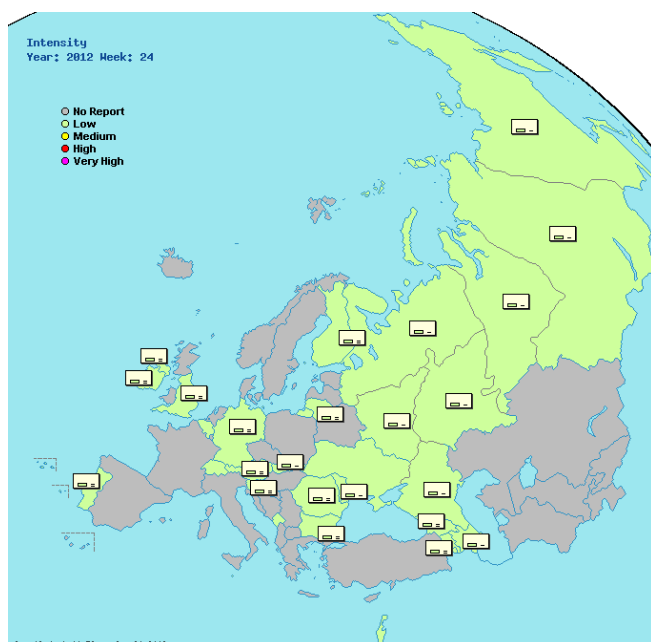
The complete overview will be posted on the WHO/Europe web site in the coming weeks.

SURVEILLANCE AND LABORATORY

2. EuroFlu Bulletin update (week 24, 2012)

Influenza activity is at out-of-season levels

Based on data reported in week 24/2012 by 32 Member States in the WHO European Region, consultation rates for influenza-like illness (ILI) and acute respiratory infection (ARI) are now at low levels in all countries in the Region. Only 1 of the 98 specimens (1.0%) collected from sentinel sources tested positive for influenza (type B).



3. EuroFlu Bulletin look updated

During the 2011-2012 influenza season, WHO/Europe updated the look and format of the EuroFlu Bulletin. The changes included adding new graphs and tables for a more visual presentation of influenza surveillance data. WHO/Europe plans to continue making updates and improvements to the EuroFlu Bulletin's look and layout in the coming months, and your feedback about the new format and/or suggested changes is welcome via email: influenza@euro.who.int

4. **Report: Taking stock of influenza surveillance in newly independent states (NIS)**

Sentinel surveillance is considered the most efficient system for routine monitoring of influenza, as it provides timely and high-quality data from a limited number of sites. Since 2008, the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta, United States, have collaborated with Member States of the WHO European Region to strengthen sentinel surveillance for influenza. The newly independent states (NIS) have been a particular focus in this regard.

In order to review progress in the implementation of sentinel influenza surveillance, a meeting was organized with key experts from the Ministries of Health and national influenza focal points from all NIS. Opportunities and challenges for moving from a universal surveillance of influenza and other respiratory diseases to a sentinel system were also discussed.

To see the complete report in English or Russian, please visit:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/publications/2012/who-meeting-taking-stock-of-influenza-surveillance-in-the-newly-independent-states>

5. **Annual joint WHO/Europe and ECDC influenza surveillance meeting**

On 30 May - 1 June 2012, WHO/Europe and the European Centres for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) jointly held their second Annual Influenza Working Meeting in Warsaw, Poland. The meeting attracted over 130 participants from 38 countries, including all EU Member States, countries participating in the South East Europe Health Network, Israel, Switzerland and Turkey. The main work undertaken by delegates in over 20 sessions and 70 talks and discussions was reviewing progress in the last 12 months and agreeing on the work for the coming year.



The main meeting covered a wide range of topics in influenza virology and epidemiology, reviewed developments in the TESSy and EuroFlu (the respective ECDC and WHO/Europe influenza surveillance platforms), reported on the activities of the ECDC Community Network Reference Laboratory and the National Influenza Centres, and included a special session on influenza vaccination.

A summary report of the meeting will be published later this year and made available on the Internet. The web news story about the meeting can be found here:

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/news/news/2012/6/joint-who-europe-and-ecdc-annual-influenza-meeting-reflects-on-work-in-progress>

6. **Strengthening capacities of influenza laboratory experts: WHO practical course on molecular identification of influenza**

In order to strengthen laboratory capacities for the diagnosis and surveillance of influenza virus infection, the WHO Regional Office for Europe organizes regular training for laboratory staff in influenza virology, molecular techniques and laboratory quality. It also provides quality assurance programs. In May 2012, WHO/Europe held laboratory training on molecular identification of influenza in cooperation with the Research Institute of Influenza of the Ministry of Health, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation. The Institute is a WHO-recognized National Influenza Centre.

The specific aim of this training was to provide selected experts from National Influenza Centres and national influenza laboratories with comprehensive laboratory skills in molecular identification of circulating human influenza virus strains. Participants attended from national influenza laboratories in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Moldova.

Topics addressed during the week-long training included laboratory specimen processing and testing algorithm, viral RNA extraction, principles of real-time reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction and interpretation of results. The agenda included both formal lectures and practical sessions, which involved hands-on training. The training resulted in improved skills and knowledge for all participants, and the curriculum was subsequently provided to all those who took part.

7. Mission to review influenza surveillance in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is 1 of approximately 15 countries in the WHO European Region that performs hospital surveillance of severe disease caused by influenza. Such routine hospital surveillance allows identification of persons at risk for developing severe disease as a result of influenza infection, as well as information on the relative severity of seasonal and pandemic influenza. This type of surveillance was identified as a gap during the 2009 pandemic.

Kazakhstan has established a system of 19 sentinel hospitals that report and test cases of severe acute respiratory infections (SARI) according to guidance provided by WHO/Europe. During a mission to the country from 30 May to 7 June 2012, WHO staff discussed the data being collected with national and regional focal points from the Ministry of Health and Sanitary Epidemiological Stations from the cities of Astana and Almaty and from Taldikorgan in the Almaty region and reviewed the activities of the laboratory network.

Discussions with the Ministry of Health focused on effective collection and use of surveillance data to inform influenza prevention and control measures. In particular, WHO staff emphasized the benefits of performing influenza testing among only those patients presenting at sentinel sites in order to use resources most efficiently. A similar recommendation was made during an inter-country meeting in 2011 involving 12 NIS countries (see the above report of the WHO Meeting: Taking stock of influenza surveillance in the newly independent states).

To view the WHO/Europe guidance for sentinel influenza surveillance in humans, follow this link: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/publications/2009/who-regional-office-for-europe-guidance-for-sentinel-influenza-surveillance-in-humans>

For a description of the system in Kazakhstan, follow this link: http://www.euroflu.org/documents/Overview_of_SARI_Surveillance_Systems_13.02.2012.pdf

INFLUENZA VACCINE

8. WHO recommendation on 2012-2013 influenza vaccine composition

The periodic update of virus strains contained in influenza vaccine is necessary due to the constant evolution of circulating influenza viruses. This leads to changes of the antigenic and genetic characteristics and, hence, a reduced match of the vaccine with circulating virus strains. How closely the vaccine matches circulating virus strains is an important factor for the effectiveness of the vaccine. WHO monitors the evolution of influenza viruses through analysis of viruses shared by National Influenza Centres (NIC) with the WHO collaborating centres for reference and research on influenza, as well as through analysis performed by the NIC, themselves. During the 2011-2012 influenza season, NIC in the WHO European Region analysed the antigenic characteristics of 2 068 influenza viruses. Based on global surveillance data related to the epidemiology and antigenic characteristics of influenza viruses, serological responses to 2011-2012 trivalent seasonal vaccines, and the availability of candidate strains and reagents, WHO recommends that influenza vaccines for use in the upcoming **2012-2013** northern hemisphere influenza season contain the following viruses:

- an A/California/7/2009 (H1N1)pdm09-like virus;
- an A/Victoria/361/2011 (H3N2)-like virus;
- a B/Wisconsin/1/2010-like virus.

The viruses shared by the National Influenza Centres of the WHO European Region contributed significantly to the new recommendations. The complete report can be viewed here:

http://www.who.int/influenza/vaccines/virus/recommendations/2012_13_north/en/

A "Questions and Answers" document concerning the recommended composition of influenza virus vaccines for use in the 2012-2013 northern hemisphere influenza season can be viewed here:

http://www.who.int/influenza/vaccines/virus/recommendations/201202_qanda_recommendation.pdf

9. New SAGE recommendations on seasonal influenza vaccine

At its April 2012 meeting, based on new evidence gathered since the previous recommendations were published in 2005, the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE) provided new recommendations on seasonal influenza vaccine. In countries considering initiating or expanding vaccination programs for influenza, SAGE recommends pregnant women as the most important risk group for inactivated seasonal influenza vaccination. Other risk groups to be considered, in no specific priority order are: health-care workers, children aged 6–59 months, the elderly and those with high risk conditions. WHO/Europe will support the Member States of the European Region to implement these recommendations according to their country priorities and capacities.

The complete report from the SAGE meeting, including more detailed information about the new recommendations, can be found by following via this link:

<http://www.who.int/wer/2012/wer8721.pdf>

10. Initial results of VENICE survey

In October 2011, WHO/Europe in partnership with the VENICE collaboration¹ and ECDC performed a survey on seasonal influenza vaccine recommendations and coverage among all Member States in the European Region. The survey was completed by 48 of 53 Member States. It showed that while the vast majority of countries is implementing seasonal influenza vaccination programmes, vaccination uptake in key target groups remains low in many countries with only 1 country reaching the WHO 2010 target of achieving >75% coverage among elderly. WHO/Europe will continue to work with Member States to increase vaccination uptake in priority target groups, as defined by each country, through an improved understanding of the barriers to achieving high vaccination coverage.

PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

11. Report: Key changes to pandemic plans by Member States of the WHO European Region based on lessons learnt from the 2009 pandemic

Between September and November 2011, WHO/Europe and ECDC organized four joint workshops on pandemic plan revisions. A total of 45 countries participated in these workshops, with the purpose of summarizing key changes being made to pandemic preparedness plans and enabling countries to learn from each other's experiences.

A joint report on the workshops was published earlier this year, which provides the key conclusions and recommendations from the four workshops.

To read the report in English or Russian, follow this link: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/publications/2012/key-changes-to->

¹ Vaccine European New Integrated Collaboration Effort <http://venice.cineca.org/>

[pandemic-plans-by-member-states-of-the-who-european-region-based-on-lessons-learned-from-the-2009-pandemic](http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/country-work/national-plans)

Additionally, three countries in the Region (Czech Republic, France and United Kingdom) have published revised plans based on the experience from the 2009 pandemic. View these and other national plans at: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/communicable-diseases/influenza/country-work/national-plans>

Finland most recently published a new version of the Finnish preparedness plan for an influenza pandemic. It is available (in Finnish) on the web site of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health: http://www.stm.fi/c/document_library/get_file?folderId=240565&name=DLFE-20728.pdf

12. Experts from Tajikistan visit Finland and Denmark as part of pandemic plan revision process

On 14-16 May 2012, two experts in pandemic preparedness from Tajikistan spent time with the members of the Influenza & other Respiratory Pathogens (IRP) programme at WHO/Europe in Denmark. The purpose of their visit was to revise their pandemic preparedness plan and create a plan that was less focused on pandemic preparedness and more applicable to general emergency preparedness. During the visit, the experts had many useful discussions with members of the IRP, Alert and Response (ARO), Country Emergency Preparedness (CEP) and Public Health Services (PHS) programmes at WHO/Europe.

Just prior to the meetings in Copenhagen, the specialists from Tajikistan met with colleagues from Tampere University, Finland, and representatives from the Finnish National Board for Pandemic Preparedness on 12-13 May 2012. They shared experiences related to pandemic preparedness plan development and revision.

Participants of both meetings gave positive feedback about the visits. WHO/Europe wishes to thank those who took an active part in the meetings and looks forward to future collaboration with Tajikistan in the area of pandemic preparedness.

13. Austrian Ministry of Health begins revision of pandemic plan

An evaluation of the 2009 influenza pandemic has been conducted in Austria, and the Federal Ministry of Health has subsequently initiated the planning process to update the Austrian National Pandemic Plan. On 25 June 2012, the Ministry held a kick-off event for the process, followed by a national-level workshop with all stakeholders. Representatives from WHO/Europe, ECDC and DG SANCO also attended the workshop.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

14. WHO/Europe Annual Influenza Surveillance Meeting

This meeting, scheduled for September 2012, will focus on sentinel hospital surveillance for severe disease caused by influenza, national influenza bulletins and will include a briefing on the [Pandemic Preparedness Framework](#) that was endorsed at the 2011 World Health Assembly 64. National influenza focal points from approximately 15 countries, primarily the newly independent states (NIS), will be invited, as well as staff from the [WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza](#), London, UK. The meeting will build on discussions held during the 2011 meeting in Istanbul, which reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of different surveillance systems for influenza, as well as on information obtained from missions to individual countries (see item above about Kazakhstan mission).

15. Pandemic preparedness meetings

WHO/Europe and ECDC will jointly arrange and conduct a series of workshops in the last quarter of 2012. All 53 Member States of the Region will be invited to attend. These workshops will aim to share good practices and make use of the experience gained in pandemic planning for other public health threats as part of national and regional level preparedness and IHR implementation. The meetings will follow the principles of rolling

workshops used in the 2011 series of pandemic preparedness workshops, ensuring that experiences from the first will be included in the second, and so forth.

16. 1st ISARIC Council Meeting

It is clear from a series of recent outbreaks that initiating clinical research in response to a rapidly emerging infectious disease is extremely challenging, but increasingly important. The International Severe Acute Respiratory Infection Consortium (ISARIC) was formally launched in December 2011 with the goal of establishing a new paradigm for collaborative clinical research in rapidly emerging public health threats. The initial focus of ISARIC is severe respiratory infections with the aim to change the current approach to clinical research during outbreaks. On 2-4 July 2012 ISARIC will hold its first official meeting since it was launched. At this initial meeting, Dr Caroline Brown, programme manager of the Influenza & other Respiratory Pathogens programme at WHO/Europe, will present on the European experience during the 2009 pandemic and the Region's needs regarding clinical research for future pandemics.

OTHER

17. Peer-reviewed publications

The members of the Influenza & other Respiratory Pathogens (IRP) Programme at WHO/Europe occasionally author peer-reviewed articles for medical journals, with the intention of disseminating information about the work done in collaboration with Member States to a wider audience. Recent published work and accompanying links are listed below:

- Liana Martirosyan, W John Paget, Pernille Jorgensen, Caroline S Brown, Tamara J Meerhoff, Dmitriy Pereyaslov, Joshua A Mott, and the EuroFlu group. The community impact of the 2009 influenza pandemic in the WHO European Region: a comparison with historical seasonal data from 28 countries. *BMC Infectious Diseases* 2012 12:36. doi:10.1186/1471-2334-12-36. <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2334/12/36>
- Angus Nicoll, Caroline Brown, Franz Karcher, Pasi Penttinen, Michala Hegermann-Lindencrone, Silvia Villanueva, Massimo Ciotti, Lucie Jean-Gilles, Sybille Rehmert & Jonathan S Nguyen-Van-Tam. Developing pandemic preparedness in Europe in the 21st century: experience, evolution and next steps. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* Volume 90, Number 4, April 2012, 245-320. <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/90/4/11-097972/en/index.html>
- Ahmed Hashim, Lucie Jean-Gilles, Michala Hegermann-Lindencrone, Ian Shaw, Caroline Brown and Jonathan Nguyen-Van-Tam. Did pandemic preparedness aid the response to pandemic (H1N1) 2009? A qualitative analysis in seven countries within the WHO European Region. In press for *Journal of Infection and Public Health*. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1876034112000603>

18. Report on management of influenza in resource-limited settings

The report "Clinical management of influenza and other acute respiratory illness in resource-limited settings: learning from the influenza pandemic (H1N1) 2009" has been published on the WHO headquarters web site at: http://www.who.int/influenza/patient_care/clinical/858-WHOGIPReport_A4_WEB_FA.pdf

19. Useful links and resources:

WHO/Europe influenza site
<http://www.euro.who.int/influenza>

WHO/Europe Vaccine-preventable diseases and immunization site
<http://www.euro.who.int/vaccine>

WHO headquarters Immunization, vaccines and biologicals site

<http://www.who.int/immunization/en/>

WHO headquarters influenza site
<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/en/>

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) influenza site
<http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/healthtopics/influenza/Pages/index.aspx>

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