World Health Organization

Frequently asked questions on IHR Emergency Committee

What is the IHR Emergency Committee?

The Emergency Committee is made up of international experts to provide technical advice to the WHO Director-General in the context of a "public health emergency of international concern" (PHEIC). It provides its views on:

- whether the event constitutes a public health emergency of international concern;
- the temporary recommendations that should be taken by the country experiencing an emergency of international concern, or by other countries, to prevent or reduce the international spread of disease and avoid unnecessary interference with international trade and travel;
- the termination of a public health emergency of international concern.

What is a public health emergency of international concern?

The term public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) is defined in the International Health Regulations as "an extraordinary event which is determined to constitute a public health risk to other States through the international spread of disease and to potentially require a coordinated international response".

This definition implies a situation that is:
- serious, sudden, unusual or unexpected;
- carries implications for public health beyond the affected State's national border; and
- may require immediate international action.

The responsibility of determining whether an event is within this category lies with WHO's Director-General who may seek the views of the IHR Emergency Committee.

Who are the members of the Emergency Committee?

WHO maintains an IHR Expert Roster composed of international experts in such fields as disease control, virology, vaccine development or infectious disease epidemiology.

WHO's Director-General selects members of the Emergency Committee from this roster and, where appropriate, from other WHO expert advisory panels and committees.

Members can be selected on the basis of expertise required for any particular session.

At least one member of the Emergency Committee should be an expert nominated by a State Party within whose territory the event arises, and such States Parties are invited to present their views to the Emergency Committee.

The Director-General may also appoint one or more technical experts to advise the Committee, on his or her own initiative or at the request of the Committee.

How are these people chosen?

Selection of members is based primarily on their technical ability and experience in the relevant fields of expertise. The Director-General aims to ensure that members of the IHR Emergency Committee have the broadest possible geographical representation, and reflect diverse knowledge, practical experience and approaches. Achieving gender balance is also a desirable aim.

Members of WHO advisory panels and committees do not receive any remuneration from the Organization.

Their names, job titles and any other information that could be determined to be a potential conflict of interest are published on WHO's website.

What decisions will the Emergency Committee make?

The Emergency Committee will provide its view to the Director General on :

- whether the event constitutes a public health emergency of international concern;
- the temporary recommendations that should be taken by countries on areas including travel, surveillance, clinical management, infection control;
- the termination of a public health emergency of international concern.

All decisions on these issues are taken by the Director-General.