FAQs

WHO Estimate of Respiratory Deaths due to Seasonal Influenza

How many people die of respiratory diseases associated with seasonal influenza each year?

WHO estimates that 290 000-650 000 respiratory deaths occur each year associated to seasonal influenza.

How did WHO reach this estimate?

The estimate takes into account findings from recent influenza respiratory mortality studies including a study conducted by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC), published in the Lancet on December 14th 2017 (http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)33293-2/fulltext?elsca1=tlxpr) as well as other ongoing research.

It also considers findings from recent influenza respiratory mortality studies conducted by the Global Pandemic Mortality Study Initiative (GLAMOR) and the Institute for Health Metrics & Evaluation (IHME).

In order to reach the new estimate, WHO consulted closely with US CDC, GLAMOR, IHME and WHO’s Influenza Burden of Disease Working Group comprising experts from the All India Institute of Medical Science, the National University of Singapore, the South African National Institute of Communicable Diseases, US CDC, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala and the University of Edinburgh.

What is the difference to the earlier influenza mortality estimate?

The new estimate is based only on respiratory death. Taking all death into consideration that are due to influenza, but do not show respiratory symptoms will make the estimate substantial higher. WHO is working together with partners to understand the whole burden of influenza mortality.

What is the significance of the updated influenza mortality estimate?

These figures indicate the high burden of influenza and its increasing social and economic costs to the world. They highlight the importance of influenza prevention for seasonal epidemics as well as potential pandemics.

Moving forward, the updated global estimate should be used by countries to better guide and evaluate their influenza prevention and control planning. The new estimate is based on respiratory diseases and incorporates more recent data taken from a larger, more diverse group of countries and improvements in influenza surveillance, virus detection and data quality.

It should replace the formerly referenced figure of 250,000-500,000 deaths from most influenza related diseases, which was developed over ten years ago, at a time when fewer countries were able to contribute data.
Does this estimate reflect the complete picture of the global influenza burden of disease?

The updated influenza mortality estimate is the beginning of a longer, complex process to develop a more complete picture of the global burden of influenza disease.

Further surveillance and laboratory studies of other diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes or asthma, which can be influenza-related, are expected to yield substantially higher estimates over the next few years, reflecting a more complete picture of the global influenza burden of disease. These studies will incorporate additional data, and consider diverse sources and settings including high, middle and low-income countries, high-risk groups, and influenza-related deaths due to diseases other than respiratory. They will also encompass those who are hospitalized, sick at home, or unaware of being infected, in addition to deaths from influenza.

What is WHO’s strategy to assess the global burden of influenza disease?

WHO’s overall strategy to assess the global burden of influenza disease is to provide guidance to Member States on how to measure influenza disease burden and economic burden; to use estimates derived from WHO methods as standard and triangulate these with estimates derived from other methods; to map existing knowledge from literature reviews, unpublished data and consultations; and to use international expertise to interpret results.

What are WHO’s recommendations for Member States to strengthen influenza preparedness and control measures?

WHO encourages countries to take measures now to prioritize influenza prevention and produce national estimates to inform influenza prevention policy. WHO supports countries in generating national estimates help them assess the effectiveness of their influenza prevention and control strategies and develop a better understanding of the global burden of influenza disease.

All countries must work together to control influenza outbreaks before they become pandemics. This includes building capacity to detect and respond to outbreaks, and strengthening health systems to improve the health of the most vulnerable and at-risk people.

How does this work contribute to WHO’s efforts to keep the world safe?

WHO’s role in coordinating and providing data on influenza burden of disease, helps Member States to decide on priority public health actions. The evidence-based data highlights the scale and extent of the burden, which in turn enables countries and the global community as a whole, to focus interventions where they are most needed. In the event of a pandemic or seasonal epidemic the data provides a solid foundation to guide national and global influenza preparedness and control measures.

What are WHO’s influenza vaccine and treatment recommendations?

WHO recommends annual influenza vaccination as the most effective way to prevent influenza. Vaccination is especially important for people at higher risk of serious influenza complications: Individuals with specific chronic medical conditions, pregnant women, children aged 6-59 months, the elderly and healthcare workers. Antivirals are also recommended for influenza treatment.
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