Access to Archival Records: External

In most cases, external researchers may access archival records once the records are 20 years old, according to the dates of individual documents consulted or, in the case of a file, the date of the most recent document in the file, unless an exception is granted by the Director-General's Office. The term "external researchers" includes academic researchers (both professors and students) and other members of the public.

The Director-General's Office may grant exemptions to the 20-year general access rule if satisfied that such exemptions are justified by the circumstances, such as the advisability of providing early access in order to facilitate research WHO considers of significant value. The applications of exemptions may be subject to specified conditions.

Certain records are subject to access restrictions regardless of the 20-year general access rule. These include, but are not limited to, records containing personal information, which, if disclosed, might prejudice the reputation, safety or privacy of individuals, and records containing business, legal or financial information obtained or created under explicit or implicit conditions of confidentiality. These records may exceptionally be made accessible to external researchers after 40 years only if the responsible technical unit provides express written permission, in consultation with the Office of the Legal Counsel and the Director-General's Office.

Archival files are retrieved and made available for supervised consultation by external users. For security and confidentiality reasons, external researchers are not given physical access to the archival storage areas. Archival records may be physically consulted on site or online upon request if the records have been digitized, and may not be signed out or removed from the premises.
Access to WHO Archives

Transcription, photocopying and digital copying of archival records to which external researchers are provided access is permitted, but complete collections, or entire subdivisions of collections, may not be copied, and copying of fragile records may be restricted. Digital photography of archival materials may be carried out by researchers under RAS supervision.

WHO retains copyright of records in the WHO Archives, except in cases of written agreement establishing otherwise. WHO records quoted or reproduced in publications must be cited appropriately.

WHO is unable to release users of the Archives from any obligations that may apply in respect of copyright or other rights belonging to third parties. It is the user’s responsibility to obtain clearance from any relevant third party. Use of WHO archival records for commercial or promotional purposes is not permitted unless explicitly authorized by WHO in writing. The decision as to whether a given potential commercial or promotional use is legitimate and in WHO’s best interests is made on a case by case basis by the Director-General’s Office, in consultation with the Office of the Legal Counsel.

Records from external sources which are deposited in the WHO Archives because of their relevance to WHO activities, are also subject to WHO access policy. External sources are informed at the time of deposit that they must clarify any specific access restrictions that they wish to impose on their records.