CORONAVIRUS UPDATE 55

Update on
WHO COVID-19 guidelines development

THE LATEST ON THE COVID-19 GLOBAL SITUATION & DEVELOPING WHO RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY
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Current global situation

CASES REPORTED TO WHO AS OF 6 April 2021, 10:00 CEST

- Cases: > 131 million
- Deaths: > 2.8 million

Note: Data smoothed with 7-day moving average

* Data are incomplete for the current week. Cases depicted by bars; deaths depicted by line
WHO guidelines contain recommendations for clinical practice or public health policy

- WHO guidelines must meet the **highest international standards** and contain trustworthy and implementable recommendations
- WHO guidelines are developed following the recommendations as described in the WHO Handbook for guideline development

Source: [https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/145714](https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/145714)
Types of WHO guidelines developed during the COVID-19 pandemic

Standard WHO guidelines are developed in 6 months up to 2 years, but during health emergencies this process is expedited through the development of:

• **Emergency interim guidelines**
  - Narrow scope and short shelf-life
  - Can be based on indirect evidence, existing WHO guidelines or expert opinion
  - Developed in **weeks**

• **Rapid advice guidelines**
  - Compressed and expedited process in response to public health emergencies
  - Developed in **1 to 3 months**

• **Emergency interim guidelines** are developed when there is a need to have guidance available within weeks; **rapid advice guidelines** are the choice if a longer timeline is available
WHO emergency guidelines are focused on emergency needs

• Challenges in developing guidance during a public health emergency often include urgency, limited resources and a lack of available data

• To address these challenges and to accelerate the guidance development process:
  ➢ the scope of emergency interim guidelines is generally limited compared to standard guidelines (standard WHO guidelines often include multiple research questions)
  ➢ the evidence to inform recommendations can be based on existing WHO guidelines or expert opinion instead of for example a systematic review

• Although the emergency interim guidelines development process is accelerated, it should continue to be based on the WHO guidelines principles and the processes as described in the WHO guideline development framework*

* Health emergency interim guidelines: a WHO guideline development framework and toolkit https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/258982
Expedited WHO guidelines development process during the COVID-19 pandemic

Figure. Expedited WHO guidelines development process during a public health emergency

- Define scope of the WHO guidance*
- Compose guidelines development group (GDG) & external review group
- Manage any conflicts of interest of GDG members & external review group members
- Formulate research question(s)
- Retrieve, assess & synthesize the evidence
- Appraise certainty of the evidence
- Formulate recommendations, including consideration of benefits and harms, resource use, feasibility, health equity, human rights & sociocultural acceptability
- Implement & evaluate impact

* A WHO Steering Committee is formed, representing different WHO departments and regions to help determine the scope of the guideline and research questions
After the scope of the guideline is determined, a development group is composed to help formulate research questions and develop recommendations.

The Guidelines Development Group (GDG) or guideline panel is constituted to ensure representation from various stakeholder groups, researchers, and clinicians.

Group members are selected to achieve geographical representation and gender balance.

Members of the GDG must complete a WHO declaration of interest form. If members are considered to have a conflict of interest, their participation may be restricted.

* When developing an emergency interim guideline, the guideline panel may have fewer members and may be less representative than for standard guidelines.
Formulating a research question, evidence retrieval & establishing certainty of evidence

• **Research questions are defined** following the **PICO format** (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome)

  **Example of a PICO question:**
  What is the role of therapy X in the treatment of patients with COVID-19?

  - **Population:** patients with SARS-CoV-2 infection
  - **Intervention:** treatment X plus standard care
  - **Comparison:** standard care
  - **Outcomes:** mortality; hospitalization

• After the formulation of the research question(s) by WHO’s steering committee and the GDG, evidence is retrieved and assessed to answer the PICO question

• Then the certainty of the evidence* is rated using GRADE, a transparent framework that provides a systematic approach for making recommendations**

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* The certainty of evidence is graded as one of 4 categories reflecting the confidence in the findings (high, moderate, low or very low)
Certainty of evidence increases when evidence is used from sources higher up the pyramid

* The certainty of evidence is graded as one of 4 categories reflecting the confidence in the findings (high, moderate, low or very low)
** When developing emergency interim guidelines, the evidence to inform recommendations can be based on expert opinion
Guideline development group discusses the evidence & other considerations

- In addition to the evidence results, the GDG members will take other considerations into account when formulating a recommendation.
- **To come to a decision**, the following is considered by the GDG or guideline panel when developing a recommendation (for example, treatment X as a therapy for patients with COVID-19):
  - Certainty of the evidence*
  - Balance of benefits and harms (of treatment X)
  - Values & preferences (of patients receiving treatment X)
  - Costs & resources (how expensive is treatment X, is it cost-effective)
  - Feasibility (of implementing treatment X)
  - Health equity
  - Human rights & sociocultural acceptability (of treatment X)

* The certainty of evidence is graded as one of 4 categories reflecting the confidence in the findings (high, moderate, low or very low)
GDG rates recommendations as strong or conditional

After the GDG has formulated the recommendations, the recommendations are rated as:

- **strong** (the group is confident that the desirable effects of the intervention outweigh the undesirable intervention) or
- **conditional** (the group considers the desirable effects of the intervention probably outweigh the undesirable intervention)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength of recommendation</th>
<th>Certainty of evidence</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>high, moderate, low, very low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional</td>
<td>high, moderate, low, very low</td>
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* The strength of a recommendation considers and includes the certainty of evidence.
Speed of the process does not compromise quality

• When the recommendations are final and included in the guidelines document, the guidelines are reviewed by the external review group

• As a final step the WHO Publication Review Committee (PRC) or the WHO Guidelines Review Committee (GRC) reviews the product to ensure WHO delivers trusted high-quality, accurate and user-friendly information

• The PRC reviews all WHO information products related to the public health emergency; its members are impartial and decisions are made within 24 hours in a transparent manner

• After final approval by the PRC, the guidelines are disseminated for use by the target audience
Living guidelines

• The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for accessible and regularly updated guidance

• In response, WHO is now developing ‘living guidelines’

• Living guidelines use a combination of continuous literature surveillance, rapid updating of systematic reviews and virtual consultations with GDG panels to update and develop new WHO recommendations

• Living guidelines are responsive to emerging evidence and remain up to date for end users

https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-clinical-2021-1
Additional resources

• WHO handbook for guideline development
  https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/145714

• Tool to help GRADE evidence to inform recommendations
  https://gradepro.org/

• Tool to develop living guidelines
  https://magic evidence.org/

• WHO guideline development framework for emergency interim guidelines
  https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/258982
COVID-19 protective measures
Protect yourself & others

- Keep your distance
- Wash your hands frequently
- Cough & sneeze into your elbow
- Ventilate or open windows
- Wear a mask