What we know about COVID-19 and influenza

THE LATEST ON THE COVID-19 GLOBAL SITUATION & READINESS FOR INFLUENZA DURING THE PANDEMIC
Current global situation for COVID-19

CASES REPORTED TO WHO AS OF 19 NOVEMBER 2021

• Cases: > 255 million
• Deaths: > 5.1 million

* Data are incomplete for the current week. Cases depicted by bars; deaths depicted by line

CHECK OUT THE LATEST GLOBAL SITUATION
WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard
Readiness for influenza during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Different respiratory viruses co-circulate, including seasonal influenza and are responsible for many acute infections and influenza-like illnesses
- Each year, seasonal influenza affects individuals in every country and results in up to one billion cases, three to five million severe cases, and up to 650,000 respiratory-related deaths worldwide\(^1,2\)
- The threat of influenza infections exists even during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Countries should be prepared and ensure optimal management of influenza during COVID-19

Actions to ensure readiness for influenza outbreaks include:

1. **Plan for influenza during the COVID-19 pandemic**
2. **Prevent**
   - Vaccination
   - Personal measures
3. **Care**
   - Clinical management
   - Antivirals
4. **Test & monitor**
   - Surveillance
   - Multiplex testing
5. **Communicate**
   - Regular communication
   - Engage with public

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\(^1\) [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5935243/]

\(^2\) 2020 showed a significant reduction in seasonal influenza cases during COVID-19 pandemic
Why planning for the influenza season is needed

- In 2020 a significant reduction in seasonal influenza cases compared to previous years was observed in both the Southern and Northern Hemispheres.
- This was probably due to public health and social measures put in place for COVID-19 and non-specific immunity induced by SARS-CoV-2.
- Currently, restrictions are easing in many countries which may result in a rise of influenza cases this season in the Northern hemisphere.
- In addition, potentially decreased population immunity due to a lack of exposure to influenza in 2020 may affect the incidence of influenza in this and coming seasons.

Data source: FluNet (www.who.int/flunet), GISRS

1 https://www.who.int/influenza/gisrs_laboratory/flunet/en/
Potential for concurrent COVID-19 and seasonal influenza or human respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) epidemics

- Influenza virus has been circulating during the COVID-19 pandemic, although at low levels so far.
- The evolution of seasonal influenza is dynamic and unpredictable. Influenza epidemics are likely both during and out of normal season.
- As seen in the past, an influenza epidemic may coincide with circulation of other respiratory viruses, and therefore different COVID-19 scenarios.
- Other non-influenza viral epidemics can also coincide with COVID-19 pandemic e.g. RSV epidemics have occurred in 2020 and 2021 with an out of season pattern and a significant number of hospitalizations.

Figure: Example of an RSV epidemic during the COVID-19 pandemic

Weekly overall hospital admission rates of human respiratory syncytial virus positive cases per 100,000 population reported through SARI Watch, England

*Please note that in previous seasons, RSV SARI Watch surveillance has run from week 40 to week 20. In the 2020 to 2021 season this was extended to run throughout the year, to allow for surveillance of out-of-season trends.*

Preventing seasonal influenza in the context of COVID-19

Administer an influenza vaccine every year to prevent severe disease in risk groups

Administer two doses of COVID-19 vaccine to eligible persons*

Ensure individual measures are implemented

COVID-19 vaccines and seasonal influenza vaccines can be administered during the same visit

1. WHO SAGE Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Recommendations during the COVID-19 Pandemic
3. Coadministration of seasonal inactivated influenza and COVID-19 vaccines (who.int)

*or one dose if an one dose schedule COVID-19 vaccine; an additional dose is recommended in immunocompromised persons
Certain risk groups for severe disease are identified as priority groups for influenza vaccination

• The following populations are identified for priority use of the influenza vaccine to prevent severe disease:\n  ➢ Young children
  ➢ Pregnant women
  ➢ Older persons
  ➢ Persons with underlying health conditions

• Health workers are prioritized to protect the individual, maintain health-care services during influenza epidemics and to reduce spread of influenza to vulnerable patient groups

• During COVID-19 and if supplies are limited, health workers and older persons should be considered as the highest priority risk groups for influenza vaccination\(^2\)

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1. [https://www.who.int/wer/2012/wer8747.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/wer/2012/wer8747.pdf?ua=1)
2. [WHO SAGE Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Recommendations during the COVID-19 Pandemic](https://www.who.int/wer/2012/wer8747.pdf?ua=1)
Population groups with increased risk for severe disease

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seasonal influenza</th>
<th>COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Young children (&lt;59 months)</td>
<td>• Older persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Older persons (&gt;65 years old)</td>
<td>• Persons with chronic conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Pregnant women</td>
<td>- cardiac conditions (hypertension &amp; cardiovascular disease)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Persons with chronic conditions</td>
<td>- chronic neurological disorders, including stroke</td>
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<tr>
<td>- cardiac conditions (hypertension &amp; cardiovascular disease)</td>
<td>- chronic lung disease (e.g., COPD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- chronic lung conditions (asthma or COPD)</td>
<td>- diabetes</td>
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<tr>
<td>- endocrine disorders (diabetes)</td>
<td>- chronic kidney disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>- neurological disorders (stroke &amp; neurodevelopmental conditions)</td>
<td>- immunosuppressed conditions (e.g., active cancer, transplant recipients, dialysis, untreated HIV and/or a detectable viral load, active treatment with immunosuppressive medication)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- chronic kidney disease</td>
<td>• Persons with obesity</td>
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<td>- metabolic disorders</td>
<td>• Persons who smoke</td>
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<tr>
<td>- hematologic disorders</td>
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<tr>
<td>- chronic liver disease and other immunosuppressed conditions,</td>
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<tr>
<td>including cancer &amp; HIV/AIDS</td>
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<tr>
<td>- chronic conditions requiring immunosuppressive therapy, such as</td>
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<tr>
<td>chronic steroid treatment or chemotherapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Persons with obesity</td>
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Considerations to prevent infections of seasonal influenza in the context of COVID-19

Continue to promote personal measures to prevent transmission of both influenza and COVID-19

Plan the procurement of influenza vaccines for the upcoming influenza season

Combine COVID-19 and influenza vaccination programmes where possible*

Consider prioritization of risk groups where vaccine supply is limited

* Coadministration of seasonal inactivated influenza and COVID-19 vaccines (who.int)
Clinical pathway for patients presenting with influenza-like symptoms

**SCREENING & TRIAGE**
Persons presented to health facilities should be evaluated for influenza-like symptoms.
If symptoms are present, infection prevention control measures should be put in place.

**CLINICAL ASSESSMENT**
Patient with suspected influenza should be evaluated for presence of risk factors for severe disease and complications such as severe pneumonia or exacerbation of chronic disease.

**TREATMENT**
Patients presenting with severe disease and those at risk for severe disease (regardless of disease severity) should be treated with antivirals regardless of testing capacity as soon as possible.

**TESTING**
Patients with severe disease or those with risk factors (regardless of severity) should be tested with rapid molecular assays. If influenza test results are negative, treatment can be modified.
Clinical pathway of at risk patients with suspected influenza

Patients with influenza-like symptoms

Patients belonging to high risk group for severe influenza

Start antiviral treatment and Test for influenza

If test is negative, treatment may be modified depending on severity of disease

If test is positive, continue antiviral treatment

If needed, add supportive treatment such as oxygen or ventilation

Source: WHO
Considerations to prepare for clinical management of patients with influenza in the context of COVID-19

**Training**
Train health workers and laboratory personnel on clinical management and infection, prevention and control measures.

Identify surge staff; including clinicians, nurses, respiratory technicians, etc.

**Structural**
Ensure facilities are ready to surge care areas to manage severe and critically ill patients including screening areas, emergency areas, and intensive care.

Include planning for maintaining essential health services.

**Supply**
Ensure sufficient supplies of diagnostics, personnel protective equipment, antivirals and oxygen and other essential medicines and advanced respiratory support devices to provide critical care.

**System/referral**
Ensure that integrated screening and referral systems for both COVID-19 and influenza are in place for rapid diagnosis, triage, prevention of transmission and treatment.

Set up clear care pathways at all levels of health systems.
How to differentiate between influenza and COVID-19

- Both influenza and COVID-19 are respiratory diseases with similar modes of transmission
- The two infections often have similar symptoms
- **Only lab testing can differentiate between influenza and COVID-19**

**People of all ages who experience severe symptoms such as:**
- fever and/or cough associated with difficulty breathing,
- shortness of breath,
- chest pain or pressure, or
- loss of speech or movement

should seek medical care immediately
WHO & global influenza surveillance

• The Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS) is used to conduct global influenza surveillance.¹

• Since COVID-19 emerged, GISRS has supported the response through the detection of COVID-19 cases²,³ in addition to other COVID-19 surveillance and control activities⁴,⁵

• GISRS surveillance provides updated information of influenza and other respiratory viruses e.g. RSV circulation in countries and regions.⁶

• National Influenza Centres (NICs) should remain vigilant for novel influenza viruses with pandemic potential and seasonal influenza virus variants

¹ Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS) (who.int)
² Preparing GISRS for the upcoming influenza seasons during the COVID-19 pandemic – practical considerations
⁴ Operational considerations to expedite genomic sequencing component of GISRS surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 (who.int)
⁵ Maintaining surveillance of influenza and monitoring SARS-CoV-2 – adapting Global Influenza surveillance and Response System (GISRS) and sentinel systems during the COVID-19 pandemic (who.int)
⁶ Global Influenza Programme (who.int).
Considerations to ensure continued monitoring & surveillance of influenza in the context of COVID-19

Maintain routine sentinel surveillance of diseases caused by respiratory pathogens, such as influenza.

Maintain timely and routine reporting of influenza data to global or regional platforms.

Continue COVID-19 surveillance strategies and ensure samples for influenza testing are sent to National Influenza Centres (NICs).

Prioritize sampling and testing and use multiplex testing for influenza and COVID-19 in sentinel surveillance sites, where possible.

Send representative viruses to WHO Collaborative Centres of GISRS for advanced risk assessment.
Transparent and regular communication

- Have a communication plan ready to accompany COVID-19 and influenza vaccination programmes
- Communicate regularly and transparently on the situation and on social and protective measures
- Develop and adapt communication materials to inform individuals of the differences and similarities between influenza and COVID-19, how people can protect themselves including information on vaccination and when and where to seek care
WHO resources on influenza during COVID-19

- **Readiness for influenza during the COVID-19 pandemic**
The policy brief provides a concise summary of information and considerations to ensure optimal management of influenza during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Operational considerations for COVID-19 surveillance using GISRS**
This document is intended for Ministry of Health and other government officials responsible for COVID-19 and influenza surveillance and summarizes the operational considerations for leveraging influenza surveillance systems to incorporate COVID-19 testing.

- **Preparing GISRS for the upcoming influenza seasons during the COVID-19 pandemic – practical considerations**

- **Public health surveillance for COVID-19: interim guidance**

- **Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS) (who.int)**

- **Coadministration of seasonal inactivated influenza and COVID-19 vaccines (who.int)**

- **Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Similarities and differences between COVID-19 and Influenza (who.int)**

- **Overview of Public Health and Social Measures in the context of COVID-19**
The document is intended to inform national and local health authorities and other decision-makers at all levels.

- **Vaccines against influenza**
This position paper is concerned mainly with vaccines and vaccination against seasonal (epidemic) influenza.

- **WHO SAGE Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Recommendations during the COVID-19 Pandemic**
Interim recommendations from the WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) on Immunization for influenza vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Considerations for implementing and adjusting public health and social measures in the context of COVID-19**
An interim guidance.

- **Interim recommendations for an extended primary series with an additional vaccine dose for COVID-19 vaccination in immunocompromised persons (who.int)**

- **Maintaining surveillance of influenza and monitoring SARS-CoV-2 – adapting Global Influenza surveillance and Response System (GISRS) and sentinel systems during the COVID-19 pandemic (who.int)**

- **Operational considerations to expedite genomic sequencing component of GISRS surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 (who.int)**
COVID-19 and seasonal influenza protective measures

Protect yourself & others

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