Risk communication

Module 2.3
10 step approach

1. Detect and confirm the outbreak and agent
2. Rapid Response Team (RRT)
3. Define cases
4. Identify cases and obtain information
5. Descriptive epidemiological investigation (time, place, person)
6. Additional studies (environmental, risk assessments, laboratory)
7. Interview cases and generate hypotheses
8. Evaluate the hypotheses
9. Inform risk managers and implement control measures
10. Communicate findings, make recommendations and evaluate the outbreak response
Key points

• Crucial component of risk management
• Should be guided by risk communication planning
• Used to guide public participation to support outbreak’s control
• Communication opportunities exist throughout the investigation → skilled communication is critical
Risk communication under the Protocol and IHR

• Article 8 of the *Protocol of Water and Health* stipulates that Parties give prompt and clear notification about outbreaks, incidents or threats in the event of any imminent threat to public health from water-related disease.

*Parties shall “disseminate to members of the public who may be affected all information that is held by a public authority and that could help the public to prevent or mitigate harm.”*

• Core requirement for countries within the framework of the *International Health Regulations (IHR)*
Effective risk communication and planning can mitigate complications during outbreaks

• Outbreaks are unpredictable and alarming to the public and attract media attention
• Public health authorities communicate through the media
• Official information has to be rapid to meet the increasingly rapid media cycle, mitigating rumors
• Communication failures can impede outbreak control measures, undermine public trust and engagement and prolong social, economic and political turmoil
Key elements of risk communication

• Trust
• Announce early
• Transparency
• Understand the public
• Integration in contingency planning
Key elements- Trust

- Communicate in ways that build, maintain or restore trust
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Trust is hard to win and easy to lose
- No trust $\rightarrow$ fear and lack of compliance
- Build trust between those leading on communication
- Trust public's ability to tolerate incomplete or alarming information
- Ensure accountability and transparency
- Listen to and be aware of public concerns
Key elements- Announce early

It helps to build public trust and prevent rumors and misinformation spreading

- Those responsible for risk communication should:
  - avoid withholding information to “protect” the public
  - acknowledge that the announcement is based on preliminary information, so the situation may change as further information emerges
  - ensure clear communication channels between key stakeholders so they are aware in advance of the announcement
  - The way the initial announcement is done may impact on the reception to all subsequent communication
Key elements- Transparency

It leads to greater trust

• Communication should be frank, easily understood, complete and accurate

• Those responsible for risk communication should:
  • keep the public informed about the activities of the investigation, including the information-gathering, risk assessment and decision-making process of outbreak management
  • focus on what is being done and the next steps
  • explain the unknowns
  • be aware that pride, embarrassment, fear of revealing weaknesses and fear of being blamed can lead to a lack of trust
Key elements - Understand the public

- Knowing who the public is, and what they think, is essential in developing effective public health messages.

Those responsible for risk communication should:
- understand the public’s beliefs, opinions and knowledge about specific risks
- involve representatives of the public in the decision-making process
- respect the public’s concern, regardless of its validity
- address the concern in any policies developed
- publicly acknowledge and correct mistaken concerns
- include information in risk-communication messages on how the public can protect themselves
Key elements- Integration in contingency planning

- Risk communication should be integrated into contingency planning for major events and outbreak response.

- Those responsible for risk communication should:
  - develop the risk-communication plan as part of the outbreak-management plan from the start of the outbreak
  - ensure media training for relevant members of the response team
  - develop partnerships with the media
  - organize press conferences to answer multiple media enquiries in an organized way
  - prepare pre-approved public health messages that can be adapted for the outbreak
Preparing public Health messages

Important to provide clear information and advice to the public during the outbreak

Best done through prepared communication messages with clear public health advice

Who is the target audience for the message?
What is their relationship to the event?
What is their level of education and the nature of their interest in the event?
Example messaging: “boil water advisory”

• Explain current risk: e.g. potential microbial contamination in specific area
• Stipulate under what circumstances: e.g. water for drinking and food preparation
• Describe action to be taken: e.g. bring the water to a rolling boil and allow to cool naturally
Preparing public health messages

The target audience can absorb only a limited amount of information, so the single overarching communication outcome and the key message that needs to be understood by the audience should be determined:

• simple, accurate, credible, relevant, consistent and timely
• should not contain technical language
• should describe clearly what needs to be done, by whom, when it needs to be done, how it needs to be done and for how long
• should be capable of being understood by, and be accessible to, different groups
Communication channels

• Institutional website

• Social media
  • important tool for directly and immediately communicating with the public.
  • enables those who use it to become involved in the response to the outbreak through commentary
  • useful for monitoring response and public concerns including community resistance, and can be used to monitor and counter rumors about the outbreak.

• Traditional media
  • Television, radio, printed press
  • Press releases

• Partners and stakeholders (internal & external)
References

- This module is based on the document: Surveillance and outbreak management of water-related infectious diseases associated with water-supply system. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

- Additional references were materials used in pilot national training workshops on water-related disease surveillance previously run by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe under the framework of the Protocol of Water and Health.