

Today marks the launch of the sixth meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Acute Respiratory Infection Surveillance (EMARIS) Network.

The meeting brings together public health experts from Ministries of Health, public health institutions, academia, scientific bodies, NGOs and others to review progress and achievements related to the prevention and control of acute respiratory infections across the Region. It is an opportunity to address current challenges and agree on plans to move forward.

This year's event takes place at a critical time. The Region faces multiple emergencies which are having a devastating impact on people's health.

The frequency and risk of disease outbreaks has increased significantly in recent years, in addition to COVID-19. Over 55 disease outbreaks were reported in the Region in 2022, compared with 31 major outbreaks in 2021 and 14 in 2020 – many of those due to respiratory infections. Over seven million reported cases and nearly 1400 associated deaths resulted from these outbreaks.

Acute respiratory infections, in particular, are one of the leading causes of illness and death in the Region and significantly impact regional health and economic development.

Prior to COVID-19, seasonal influenza has been the biggest cause of morbidity and mortality associated with acute respiratory infections across all countries in the Region, but it is also important to track and respond to other respiratory viruses such as a respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV).

Many previous pandemics have been caused by respiratory viruses, and the risk of further pandemics and epidemics of respiratory viruses is high.

Collaborative efforts by the World Health Organization, Member States and other partners are making impressive progress in strengthening and enhancing health systems to prevent, prepare

for, detect and control emerging respiratory diseases across the Region. We are building on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in that process.

Last year, WHO developed a regional framework and operational plan to integrate the surveillance systems for influenza, SARS-CoV-2 and other respiratory viruses with epidemic and pandemic potential.

Many countries in the Region are now implementing integrated surveillance of influenza and other respiratory diseases.

Additionally, guided by our regional roadmap to increase utilization and uptake of the seasonal influenza vaccine, WHO is supporting countries to introduce and expand their national influenza vaccination policies and strengthen their influenza vaccination programmes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a milestone in disease surveillance was achieved, with all 22 countries and territories in the Region developing many core capacities under the International Health Regulations (2005), including surveillance, laboratory services risk communication, infection prevention and control, and more.

The impressive expansion of laboratory capacities offers benefits beyond COVID-19 detection as it also enables the continuous monitoring of pathogens and the analysis of their genetic similarities and differences.

Furthermore, WHO has supported the improvement of sentinel surveillance for Severe Acute Respiratory Infection (SARI) and influenza-like illnesses (ILIs) in all countries of the Region.

Twenty-one of the 22 countries are currently implementing SARI and ILI surveillance with enhanced data collection and analysis attributes.

As we seek to reinforce prevention, preparedness, detection, and response to respiratory

diseases through this year's meeting, we are urging all countries to focus on the following priorities:

- strengthening integrated respiratory disease surveillance systems and structures, as part of a broader agenda to support integrated disease surveillance at community level;
- building capacities for respiratory disease detection, prevention and control, including seasonal influenza, RSV, MERS, and other vaccine preventable respiratory diseases;
- scaling up the introduction and rollout of seasonal influenza vaccination;
- facilitating research to fill knowledge gaps and influence public health policy;
- linking global efforts to country priorities;
- facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration on influenza and other respiratory diseases; and
- promoting a One Health approach.

At WHO, we have made it one of our top regional priorities in humanitarian settings for 2023 to strengthen country capacities to prevent, prepare for, detect and respond to disease outbreaks and other health emergencies.

It is a moral and professional imperative to commit to and invest in pandemic preparedness and take advantage of lessons learned from COVID-19. We must all work together to ensure Health for All by All and promote a One Health approach.

Thank you.

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