

Implementation of influenza vaccination campaign 2021/22

Joint Statement

July 2021



Seasonal influenza poses a significant but often under-recognised challenge to national health systems across Europe. Despite influenza vaccines being available for decades, influenza still has one of the highest and recurring impacts in terms of incidence and mortality among vaccine-preventable diseases and is estimated to cause up to 70,000 deaths in the EU each year, particularly among older adults and other at-risk groups¹.

The persistence, or resurgence, of COVID-19 during influenza seasons threatens to overwhelm healthcare systems and workforce, due to an even greater number of illnesses, hospitalisations and deaths. This is a significant worry as many healthcare professionals, exhausted from the COVID-19 pandemic, are exhibiting symptoms of psychological trauma, anxiety and depression².

In 2020, we observed an unprecedented increase in demand for influenza vaccines as health authorities sought to minimize preventable disease and keep individuals at risk of influenza complications out of hospitals and community practices. Vaccine manufacturers responded to this increased demand by supplying on average 30% more doses in Europe for the 2020/21 influenza season through maximising their production campaigns³.

Complacency and changing epidemiology might undermine efforts to protect population from influenza

While governments have been very active in purchasing influenza doses to protect their populations, there is a risk that complacency might lead to very low vaccination uptake. The extremely low levels of influenza circulating, due to travel restrictions, exceptional social distancing measures and the possibility of viral interference along with higher vaccination rates, may result in lower population natural immunity, increasing the risk of an upsurge of cases for future influenza seasons.⁴ World leading epidemiologists warn that the current situation severely challenges our ability to predict the epidemiology of the next influenza season and that as lockdowns and border controls are eased and international travel gradually resumes, the threat of an upsurge in influenza and the devastating health impacts that could come from a severe influenza season needs to be taken seriously.

¹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/seasonal-influenza/facts/factsheet>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7441863/>

³ Data provided by Vaccines Europe Members (Abbott, GSK, Sanofi Pasteur, Seqirus) in October 2020.

⁴ Baker, Rachel E et al. "The impact of COVID-19 nonpharmaceutical interventions on the future dynamics of endemic infections" Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America vol. 117,48 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2013182117>; The Academy of Medical Sciences. COVID-19: Preparing for the future. Looking ahead to winter 2021/22 and beyond. https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/4747802?utm_source=POLITICO.EU&utm_campaign=17f953b4ef-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_07_16_11_00&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_10959edeb5-17f953b4ef-190173357

sector in the dialogue is similarly essential to ensure the availability of the necessary cold room storage capacities to accommodate both influenza and COVID-19 vaccines in parallel.

Continued commitment from influenza vaccines developers, manufacturers and distributors

The vaccine industry continues to work around the clock to develop and deliver the COVID-19 vaccines in response to the current pandemic. In parallel with these efforts, influenza vaccine manufacturers have continued to develop enhanced influenza vaccines, for example, through the use of adjuvants, high dose, cell or recombinant based technologies. Several companies are also investigating the use of the “new” technologies which have been employed in the COVID-19 response for influenza vaccines⁹.

However, seasonal influenza and COVID-19 will continue to be a combined threat this year, hence, it is critical today to ensure the best use of existing vaccines which have proven benefits in preserving people’s health and avoiding sustained pressure on healthcare systems.

Calls for action

We encourage EU Member States to demonstrate strong political leadership and to take the necessary policy measures to underline the importance of influenza vaccination to the public and healthcare professionals (HCPs), while balancing the considerations of implementing concomitant influenza and COVID-19 vaccination programmes. Multi-stakeholder approaches will contribute to achieve this, including:

1. Strong, clear and consistent campaigns and calls to get vaccinated, and extension of the influenza vaccination campaign duration to broaden vaccination opportunities.
2. Facilitation of access via healthcare professionals in local communities.
3. Equal priority on maintaining progress in all vaccination programs, including for influenza, through pro-active public education and communication by authorities in collaboration with key stakeholders including medical, nurses & pharmacist associations, healthcare distributors, civil society groups and public health institutions to secure uptake and confidence in vaccinations.
4. Clear communication and guidance to HCPs on the programmatic management of the influenza vaccination alongside the COVID-19 one, timing and location of vaccine supply, right time to vaccinate and co-administration, so they can plan and advise patients and citizens accordingly.

In summary, we encourage early multi-stakeholder dialogue and initiatives and welcome on-going actions from EU Member States as they work to ensure their national influenza vaccination programmes are effectively communicated and implemented. Policy changes and early engagement in future influenza seasons will help to both increase and sustain demand and supply for influenza vaccines in the long-term, which is not only in the interest of public health and security but is also a key element in increasing pandemic preparedness.

⁹ <https://www.sanofi.com/en/media-room/press-releases/2021/2021-06-22-07-00-00-2250633>.