

Prepared for any public health emergency



August 2007

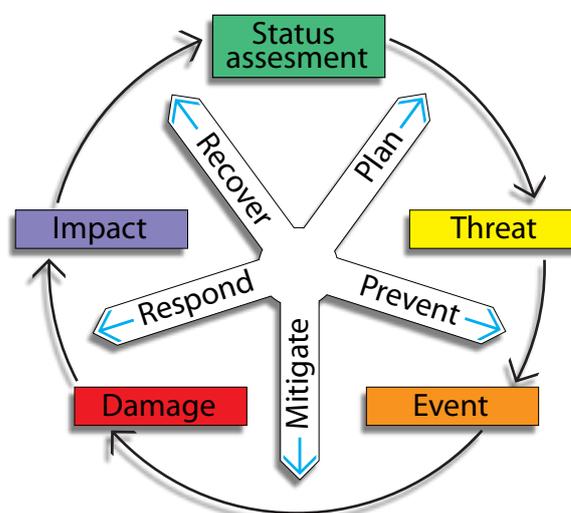
Threats to public health are an ongoing cause of concern for health authorities across the world.

To ensure that the EU is ready to face these threats, the European Commission is collaborating with EU Member States and international key players involved in public health to develop appropriate response strategies.

GENERIC PREPAREDNESS PLANNING

- The European Commission has issued a generic preparedness planning, which covers a full range of threats to public health.
- These include unexpected events, which can involve biological, chemical, physical or radio-nuclear agents, such as a SARS-like epidemic. It also considers emergencies caused by deliberate acts, accidental or natural events, as well as anticipated occurrences, such as pandemic influenza.
- The planning advises national authorities to set up measures in eight different areas, which are described overleaf. The Commission has taken action in each area to facilitate the coordination at EU level of every stage of a public health emergency.

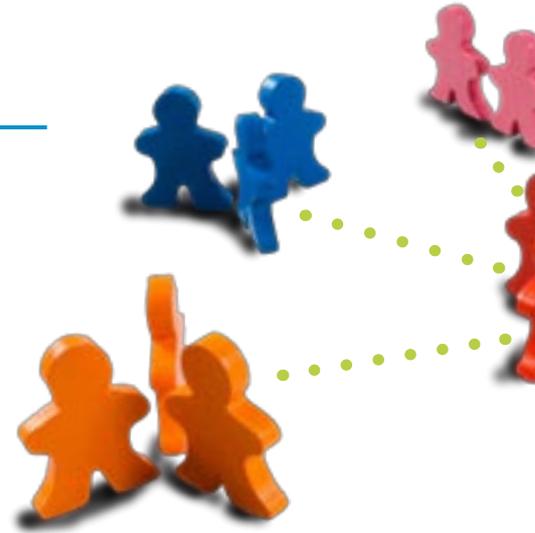
Stages of a public health emergency



EIGHT STEPS TO AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

1. Managing information

Authorities must gather, use and disseminate information relevant to health emergencies. In their respective fields, the Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) have helped to set standards in this area and coordinate the surveillance and monitoring of health threats via information systems, surveillance networks and rapid alert systems.



MedSys is an online tool which collects and classifies relevant articles, stores statistics and uses an algorithm to detect 'breaking news'. Alerts are sent to public health professionals via e-mail or text message.

2. Ensuring successful communication

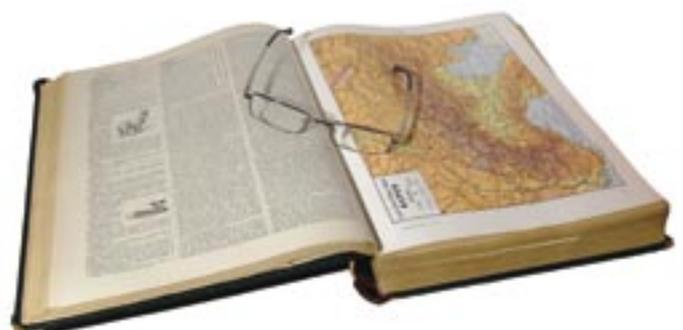
The distribution of accurate and timely information is critical in ensuring an effective response to emergencies. To achieve this, the Commission has set up several early warning and rapid alert systems.

Early warning and rapid alert systems set up by the Commission allow Member State public health authorities and the Commission to exchange information, to receive and send alerts on events likely to affect public health at EU level, and to trigger and coordinate response. The Commission has developed an early warning system called EWRS for communicable diseases. A rapid alert system called RAS-BICHAT has also been set up to address health threats due to deliberate release of chemical, biological and radio-nuclear agents.

3. Seeking scientific advice

Responses to emergencies should be based on scientific and technical expertise. The Commission has established committees of specialists, which can be consulted on risk assessment and provide sound advice.

Community Agencies, supported by specialists from Member States, are an additional source of advice. In the field of health, these include the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA).





4. Coordinating response at EU level

The Commission is working to ensure that, in the event of an emergency, Member States are able to react in a coordinated and thus more effective way. It has put in place a structure which identifies the key players at national level and enables them to achieve the best possible response for each Member State.

Two committees representing the public health authorities in Member States have been created to help them cope with to new potential situations.

The Health Security Committee for action related to pandemics and events related to the intentional release of biological or chemical agents.

The Early Warning and Response System Committee to support the European network for the epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases.



HEDIS is an online platform designed to support the Commission and Member States if there is a public health emergency. It is a situation awareness tool offering an overview on an identified health threat and includes particular communication tools, such as a forum and a messaging service. HEDIS also stores documents for information sharing and gives access to mathematical modelling tools to evaluate the best possible response.

5. Preparing the public health sector

An emergency will put an added strain on the health sector, so it needs to be ready to adapt to new requirements. The Commission facilitates the exchange of information amongst EU countries about national preparedness plans in order to improve their state of preparedness.

6. Involving other sectors

During a public health emergency, different sectors would need to support the public health sector with medical interventions, like vaccinations, as well as to perform other vital tasks, such as ensuring the availability of vital supplies, dealing with transport and coordinating actions across borders. Commission activities include, amongst other things, a programme to protect critical infrastructures in the event of an emergency.

7. Coordinating action within the European Commission

To guarantee that it provides maximum support to its Member States, the Commission has set up an internal network, ARGUS, in order to coordinate its own services. In the event of an emergency, Commission representatives in charge of areas such as humanitarian operations, transport and research will work together to achieve better results.

8. Evaluating planning

To verify the coherence and feasibility of its planning, as well as the capacity for a coordinated response, the Commission organised two simulation exercises in 2005. These allowed further improvements to be made, inter alia, the development of coordination tools such as HEDIS, which will be put to the test in further exercises.

EXAMPLES OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS

A sample of the projects funded under the Public Health Programme 2003-2008. These projects aim to enhance the capability of the EU of responding rapidly and in a coordinated fashion to health threats.

- **EISS** (the European Influenza Surveillance Scheme), in action since 1996, helps to reduce the burden of disease associated with influenza in Europe by collecting and exchanging information. It publishes a weekly report based on data reported by 13 000 physicians and covering around 476 million inhabitants.
- **ETHREAT** is developing training material for European health professionals so they can rapidly recognise and respond to new public health threats, such as attacks with biological, chemical and radiological agents.
- **ESAC** (European Surveillance of Antimicrobial Consumption) is an international network which aims to use antibiotic consumption data to develop health indicators related to antibiotic use.
- **EPISOUTH** will improve communicable diseases surveillance, communication and training by enhancing collaboration across the Mediterranean countries and the Balkans.

International Cooperation

In order to improve the EU state of preparedness and better protect EU citizens against health threats, the Commission actively cooperates with international public health partners, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Global Health Security Initiative, the countries of the European Economic Area and particularly included in the European Neighbourhood Policy.

International Health Regulations

EU Member States are implementing International Health Regulations (IHR) set up by the WHO. These legally binding regulations, adopted by most countries, aim at containing the threats from diseases that may rapidly spread from one country to another. IHRs address issues such as the designation of national focal points or the notification to WHO by the most efficient means of communication available. In this context, the early warning and response system developed by the Commission is a supporting tool for EU Member States.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Health EU Portal – The Public Health Portal of the European Union
<http://health.europa.eu>
- DG SANCO pages about health security and preparedness
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_threats/com/preparedness/preparedness_en.htm
- Projects funded by the EU to enhance the capability of responding rapidly and in a coordinated fashion to health threats
http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_threats/com/projects_threats_en.htm
- Medisys – public version
<http://medusa.jrc.it>
- European Centre for Disease prevention and Control (ECDC)
<http://www.ecdc.eu.int>

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http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/index_en.htm

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