2. Optimizing decision-making during outbreaks

Member States must act decisively to save lives and protect health during outbreaks and other public health emergencies. But decision-making can be difficult when facing a rapidly evolving situation with limited or conflicting information.

The use of multiple sources of information enhances risk assessment and confidence in decisions, and plays a crucial role in informing shifts in response strategy.

During influenza pandemics, countries face stiff pressure to take rapid action. In deciding how to minimize public health impact, they often contend with huge gaps in information, especially when pandemics are caused by new virus strains. Nevertheless, a decision must be made at some point to shift from rapid containment to mitigation strategies. The response must also be adjusted over time based on transmissibility, severity and impact of the strain, which are often unknown early in the pandemic.

WHO works with Member States to identify data sources to inform decision-making during influenza pandemics. Sources include: weekly counts of influenza-like cases; confirmed influenza cases; cumulative deaths among hospitalized cases; and absenteeism from school and work. Multiple sources of information lead to better decisions on control efforts.

WHO has advocated multiple sources of information to strengthen risk assessment and decision-making. Now the Organization is going one step further with the development of practical guidance for Member States.

Drafted in consultation with Member States and partners, and incorporating lessons learnt from outbreaks and emergencies, the guidance will help countries incorporate both qualitative and quantitative information from a range of sources to assess risk and guide decision-making. The guidance also urges Member States to involve stakeholders beyond health in the process.