

FluCov-Bulletin – March 2023

FluCov project: combining data from around the world to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on influenza activity

Commentary

Contents

It is now more than three years since a cluster of atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) (January 1, 2020) that was later linked to the new **SARS-CoV-2** virus. The FluCov Bulletin provides an overview of the number of positive cases of influenza and **SARS-CoV-2** and the percentage of specimens that tested positive from January 2019 onwards in 22 countries across most regions of the world (see page 3).

Results

Globally, a second, smaller, peak in influenza activity was observed during the current Northern Hemisphere winter (Figure 1). The following country patterns were observed for influenza in March 2023:

- The increase in influenza detections in **China**, driven by a mix of influenza A(H1N1)pdm09 and A(H3N2), continued. However, a peak seems to have been reached mid-March [1].
- Influenza detections, as well as the percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza (positivity rate), also increased in Germany and Poland, where influenza B (Victoria, if lineage was determined) is now dominant. An increase in influenza B/Victoria detections was also observed in Brazil (Southern Hemisphere).
- In other countries experiencing a second influenza peak dominated by B/Victoria (France, Spain and Italy), influenza activity has started to decrease again.
- Influenza activity also decreased in the United States (A(H3N2)), Israel (A(H1N1)pdm09) and the Netherlands (mix of A and B) [2].
- Low influenza activity was observed in **Canada** and **Mexico**, but the dominant type shifted to influenza B. In **Mexico**, the positivity rate increased during the month of March.
- No significant influenza activity was observed in Australia and South Africa, the two other Southern Hemisphere countries covered by the Bulletin.
- Influenza activity was relatively low, or decreasing in most Asian countries covered by the Bulletin (Japan, Thailand, South Korea, Philippines and India), except for China.

Globally, **SARS-CoV-2** detections have been generally decreasing since August 2022 (see Figure 1; note: the increase in November 2022 was largely driven by detections in Asia e.g. China). The following country patterns were observed for **SARS-CoV-2** in March 2023:

- Relatively low SARS-CoV-2 activity was reported in most countries covered by the Bulletin: Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States and Vietnam
- A small increase in **SARS-CoV-2** cases was reported in **Brazil** and **Poland**.
- The decrease in SARS-CoV-2 cases reported in Japan continued and the country has returned to relatively low SARS-CoV-2 activity at the end of March.

Implications

After an early onset and a peak that was reached in December 2022 (around week 49/2022 in North American countries and week 51/2022 in European countries), the current influenza season is coming to an end. The steep increase in influenza cases in China (mainly caused by a mix of A(H1N1)pdm09 and A(H3N2)) continued during March, but seems to have reached its peak mid-March. A number of European countries (France, Italy and Spain) experienced a second influenza peak, driven by influenza B/Victoria, but detections decreased in March. In some new countries, an increase in influenza B was reported in March (Germany, Poland and Brazil) and there was also a shift in the dominant influenza type to B in Canada and Mexico, so it is unlikely that an influenza B epidemic will stay restricted to European countries.

Thus far, only influenza B/Victoria was found as the dominant lineage when this was determined. The detection and characterization of influenza B viruses has become increasingly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where influenza B/Yamagata appears to be extinct [3].

SARS-CoV-2 activity was relatively low, or decreasing in most countries covered by the Bulletin, except for a small increase in **Brazil** and **Poland**. It is of note that according to WHO, detections are also increasing in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and South-East Asia (including, **India**) [4].

Globally, influenza and SARS-CoV-2 are co-circulating. The recent increase in cases of influenza B in some countries is a common characteristic of influenza epidemics, with first an influenza A peak and then an influenza B peak [5]. Strengthening surveillance activities is important to monitor the recent developments in SARS-CoV-2 activity and possible unexpected events such as the emergence of human H5N1 avian influenza cases, most recently a severe case in Chile, confirmed on 29 March 2023, who was admitted to Intensive Care [6]. This is the second case of avian Influenza in humans reported in South America, following a case in Ecuador, in January 2023 [6].



Figure 1: SARS-CoV-2 and influenza detections in the 22 countries covered by the Bulletin (period: from week 1/2019 to week 12/2023)^a

^a Due to a high number of retrospectively added SARS-CoV-2 detections in China, the peak in total SARS-CoV-2 detections in late 2022 increased significantly, compared to previous Bulletins.

Disclaimer: Comparisons <u>between countries and seasons</u> of influenza and SARS-CoV-2 detections should be made with care, as national surveillance systems may differ (e.g. surveillance structures and testing intensity) and change over time.

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Monthly plots by country

The plots per country show weekly data for influenza and of SARS-CoV-2 infections from January 1, 2019 up to March 26, 2023. This FluCov-Bulletin includes the countries Canada, United States, Mexico, Brazil, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Poland, South Africa, Egypt, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Israel and Australia.

Per country, the first plot displays the number of positive influenza (in blue) and SARS-CoV-2 (in red) detections. An overview of the absolute number of influenza and of SARS-CoV-2 detections per country can be found on pages 26-28 of this FluCov-Bulletin (click here). The bar displays the Stringency Index (SI; a country-specific composite metric of the mitigation measures that are in place) over time. The second plot shows the influenza detections by subtypes/lineages reported to FluNet. The third plot displays the percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza during the current season (in red), the last season, and the average of the two pre COVID-19 seasons (2017-18 and 2018-19)

The FluCov Dashboard is live!

All Figures and Tables in the FluCov-Bulletin can now be accessed (real-time) at: https://www.nivel.nl/en/dossier-epidemiology-respiratory-viruses/flucov-dashboard

Countries (click to view plot)

North America Canada United States	Northern Africa Egypt
Central America Caribbean Mexico	Southern Africa South Africa
Tropical South America Brazil	Eastern Asia China Japan South Korea
Northern Europe United Kingdom	Southern Asia India
Eastern Europe Poland	South East Asia Philippines Thailand
South West Europe	Vietnam
France Germany Italy	Western Asia Israel
Spain	Oceania Australia



North America



United States







Central America Caribbean





Tropical South America



Northern Europe

United Kingdom



Percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza in different seasons: data not available



Eastern Europe





- Pre-COVID-19 (2017-2019 avg.)
- 2023









Germany



Percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza in different seasons



Season

- Pre-COVID-19 (2017-2019 avg.)
- 2022 - 2023

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Netherlands



Note: As a result of a technical issue, influenza data for the Netherlands is missing for 2023.

Percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza in different seasons: data not available

Spain





Northern Africa







Southern Africa





Note: Due to a high number of retrospectively added SARS-CoV-2 detections, the peak in China in late 2022 increased significantly, compared to previous Bulletins.







Percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza in different seasons: data not available

South Korea





Southern Asia







Philippines



Percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza in different seasons: data not available

Thailand





Vietnam



Percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza in different seasons



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Western Asia





Oceania





Absolute numbers per country

Country	Year	Cases ^{a,b} of	+/- since	Cases ^a of	+/- since	Week of last
		SARS-CoV-2	last month ^c	influenza	last month ^c	influenza update
Australia	2019			12,404		
Australia	2020	28,381		784		
Australia	2021	338,226		7		
Australia	2022	10,418,952		8,650		
Australia	2023	292,072	39,227	446	202	2023-12
Brazil	2019			3,320		
Brazil	2020	7,563,551		1,314		
Brazil	2021	14,700,856		1,183		
Brazil	2022	14,038,581		3,648		
Brazil	2023	902,262	180,260	1,283	875	2023-12
Canada	2019			43,196		
Canada	2020	565,508		44,956		
Canada	2021	1,536,966		337		
Canada	2022	2,390,012		71,314		
Canada	2023	133,360	34,468	5,780	1,520	2023-12
China	2019			122,757		
China	2020	96,673		31,164		
China	2021	35,107		10,145		
China	2022	84,793,262		52,705		
China	2023	14,313,101	208,015	66,458	55,148	2023-12
Egypt	2019			1,998		
Egypt	2020	136,644		659		
Egypt	2021	248,084		233		
Egypt	2022	130,786		2,709		
Egypt	2023	368	184	209	0	2023-07
France	2019			25,405		
France	2020	2,564,972		16,589		
France	2021	6,917,610		3,071		
France	2022	28,717,231		40,014		
France	2023	477,600	164,180	16,627	3,280	2023-12
Germany	2019			1,215		
Germany	2020	1,734,449		958		
Germany	2021	5,430,620		29		
Germany	2022	30,220,925		1,923		
Germany	2023	952,304	180,724	426	181	2023-12
India	2019			9,698		
India	2020	10,266,679		457		
India	2021	24,572,130		4,085		
India	2022	9,840,329		76		
India	2023	29,141	21,154	879	457	2023-12
Israel	2019			1,796		
Israel	2020	419,660		1,424		
Israel	2021	962,277		456		
Israel	2022	3,381,613		774		
Israel	2023	49,247	13,822	753	120	2023-11

Country	Year	Cases ^{a,b} of	+/- since	Cases ^a of	+/- since	Week of last
		SARS-CoV-2	last month ^c	influenza	last month ^c	influenza update
Italy	2019			2,787		
Italy	2020	2,083,689		7,484		
Italy	2021	3,897,739		31		
Italy	2022	19,187,010		5,817		
Italy	2023	505,004	83,949	2,064	635	2023-12
Japan	2019			10,343		
Japan	2020	230,304		2,915		
Japan	2021	1,503,021		9		
Japan	2022	27,371,745		204		
Japan	2023	4,316,715	231,221	1,144	100	2023-11
Mexico	2019			6,963		
Mexico	2020	1,496,068		4,799		
Mexico	2021	2,538,755		960		
Mexico	2022	3,232,579		10,314		
Mexico	2023	260,484	66,545	1,179	221	2023-12
Netherlands	2019			5,166		
Netherlands	2020	785,874		3,235		
Netherlands	2021	2,329,020		471		
Netherlands	2022	5,454,287		14,863		
Netherlands ^d	2023	38,942	12,868	6,394	3,128	2023-07
Philippines	2019			612		
Philippines	2020	472,523		52		
Philippines	2021	2,368,495		105		
Philippines	2022	1,221,641		260		
Philippines	2023	17,523	3,952	56	24	2023-11
Poland	2019			1,786		
Poland	2020	1,297,460		1,282		
Poland	2021	2,811,801		2		
Poland	2022	2,259,187		1,604		
Poland	2023	122,969	71,964	1,685	344	2023-12
South Africa	2019			1,164		
South Africa	2020	1,039,161		157		
South Africa	2021	2,407,371		413		
South Africa	2022	602,048		1,171		
South Africa	2023	21,854	8,856	20	5	2023-11
South Korea	2019			1,702		
South Korea	2020	60,722		505		
South Korea	2021	570,113		0		
South Korea	2022	28,428,438		295		
South Korea	2023	1,714,187	259,739	332	48	2023-12
Spain	2019			16,580		
Spain	2020	1,955,216		8,827		
Spain	2021	4,550,685		2,206		
Spain	2022	7.178.357		16.841		
Spain	2023	106,322	27,244	5,959	2,150	2023-12
Thailand	2019	,		1.568	, -	
Thailand	2020	6.919		297		
Thailand	2021	2,216.551		23		
Thailand	2022	2,500.484		465		
Thailand	2023	4,713	597	266	115	2023-12

Country	Year	Cases ^{a,b} of	+/- since	Cases ^a of	+/- since	Week of last
		SARS-CoV-2	last month ^c	influenza	last month ^c	influenza update
United Kingdom	2019			42,447		
United Kingdom	2020	2,563,565		14,369		
United Kingdom	2021	10,878,101		2,755		
United Kingdom	2022	10,568,632		26,893		
United Kingdom	2023	276,113	94,949	4,849	539	2023-12
United States	2019			268,524		
United States	2020	19,577,585		229,766		
United States	2021	33,956,701		39,507		
United States	2022	45,877,410		460,297		
United States	2023	3,285,870	678,002	30,709	1,609	2023-10
Vietnam	2019			355		
Vietnam	2020	1,456		146		
Vietnam	2021	1,713,286		39		
Vietnam	2022	9,810,402		103		
Vietnam	2023	2,066	305	0	0	2022-51

^a Laboratory-confirmed cases.

^b As of the 24th bulletin, the data source, used by Our World In Data, for SARS-CoV-2 cases has been changed retrospectively. As a result, yearly totals displayed in this table may differ from those in previous bulletins.

^c Influenza cases are reported by FluNet on a weekly basis. To convert these data to months, weekly data are assigned to the month most days in that week belong to. SARS-CoV-2 cases are reported per day and assigned to each month by date. +/- since last month includes all cases over the last full calendar month.

^d As a result of a technical issue, influenza data for the Netherlands is missing for 2023. Displayed here are data from the 23rd bulletin (end February).

Methodology

Background

After assessment of alarming levels of spread and severity of SARS-CoV-2 virus, on March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic [7]. The emergence of this new virus has had a major impact on the global circulation of respiratory viruses, including influenza and RSV [8]. The FluCov project aims to understand and communicate the impact of COVID-19 on: i) influenza activity and ii) prevention and control measures (e.g. vaccination) in the coming years.

Scope

The countries included in this FluCov-Bulletin are distributed over the Americas (North, Central and Tropical South), Europe (Northern, South West and Eastern), Africa (Northern and Southern), Asia (Eastern, Southern, South East and Western) and Oceania. These data are compared to the prevention and control measures applied in each country using the Stringency Index from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) [9].

Data sources

- Influenza: FluNet [10] is a global web-based tool for influenza virological surveillance first launched in 1997. The virological data entered into FluNet, e.g. number of influenza viruses detected by subtype, are critical for tracking the movement of viruses globally and interpreting the epidemiological data. The data are provided remotely by National Influenza Centres (NICs) of the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS) and other national influenza reference laboratories collaborating actively with GISRS or are uploaded from WHO regional databases.
- SARS-CoV-2: Our World in Data systematically collects COVID-19 data which is presented in their online tool [11]. We used this platform to extract data on the number of cases, as well as tests performed per country. As of 8 March 2023, Our World in Data changed their primary data source from the John Hopkins repository on daily confirmed COVID-19 cases to the WHO [12].
- Government response tracker: The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) [9] systematically collects information on several different common policy responses that governments have taken to respond to the pandemic on 20 indicators such as school closures and travel restrictions. It now has data from more than 180 countries. OxCGRT data is downloaded directly from the Our World in Data platform.

Extraction details

Data were extracted on 3 April 2023 and cover the period 1 January 2019 to 2 April 2023 (29 March for SARS-CoV-2). Data from both platforms are regularly updated and **sometimes retrospectively corrected**. This might explain any discrepancies between our reported figures and the data published online, even when using data for the exact same period. In case of any unclarities or perceived irregularities, feel free to contact us at <u>flucov@nivel.nl</u>.

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Websites

Project Website: https://www.nivel.nl/en/flucov

FluCoV Dashboard: https://www.nivel.nl/en/dossier-epidemiology-respiratory-viruses/flucov-dashboard

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