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Health Issues Outlook 2022

Global Advisory Services

29 March 2022



Introduction

This health update is provided by Aspen Medical's Global Advisory Services division, as part of our responsibility to care for clients and the community. Our aim is to respond to client enquiries concerning health hazards and to highlight potential risks faced by organisations at this time.

COVID-19

Sublineage BA.2 of the Omicron Variant of Concern

Sublineage BA.2 of the Omicron Variant of Concern was first detected in Australia in December 2022. It is inherently more transmissible than sublineage BA.1, which was responsible for most of the initial Omicron wave in December 2021 and January 2022. By March 2022, BA.2 has become the most common cause of COVID in Eastern Australia. The World Health Organization (WHO) has confirmed that BA.2 does not cause more hospitalisations or deaths than BA.1 in either vaccinated or unvaccinated people.

Outbreaks

The Omicron wave commenced in December 2021, first in New South Wales and since then in all other states and territories, reaching an initial peak around four weeks after commencement in each jurisdiction.

Since the peak, Omicron BA.2 has caused a high proportion of cases in the extended tail of the Omicron wave. Several factors may be contributing to the extension of this wave, including relaxation of isolation, physical distancing and mask wearing directions; low third dose coverage (about 58% as of 22 March 2022); incomplete vaccination of children; and waning vaccine immunity, combined with general COVID-restriction fatigue in the community and less physical distancing indoors.

We can expect further outbreaks in 2022. Winter may be challenging with COVID-19 outbreaks, coinciding with influenza and other viral coughs and colds in the community.

Controls

Vaccination, including boosters, remains the primary control in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical that people eligible for a third dose get vaccinated because protection against symptomatic Omicron infection with two doses is close to zero. A third dose increases this to over 70%. Basic prevention measures remain important, including physical distancing especially indoors, wearing masks in busy indoor areas where physical distancing is not possible, washing or sanitising our hands, covering coughs and sneezes in public, and good ventilation.

Key risk mitigation practice: Encourage and facilitate your workforce to obtain vaccine boosters when eligible.

International travel

International air travel is picking up around the world now borders are reopening. Many COVID control restrictions remain and are subject to continual change. These restrictions – for departure, transit and arrival jurisdictions and for the carrier – should be checked before travelling. It is important to allow sufficient time to meet these requirements and trip itineraries should be planned with this in mind. Travellers should be prepared to change their plans as necessary, able to isolate in place if they get COVID and confident about how to get whatever healthcare they need, wherever they are.

Intending travellers should ensure they get a third dose of COVID vaccination and use masks (preferably N95 respirators) while travelling.

Key risk management practice: Travellers be fully vaccinated and closely monitor requirements for testing and quarantine prior to travel. Assess availability of health care in travel destination.

The 2022 influenza season

After very little influenza (flu) during the Australian winters of 2020 and 2021, there is likely to be a significant outbreak in winter 2022, possibly starting earlier than usual.

Flu vaccinations for the 2022 southern hemisphere winter are currently being manufactured to cover the four flu strains recommended by the WHO and these will be available from April 2022.

Influenza and COVID-19

Like COVID, the flu is a respiratory tract virus and the same factors that contribute to the spread of COVID will contribute to the spread of the flu.

Many parts of the country are likely to experience simultaneous flu and COVID outbreaks in winter 2022, which may cause high absenteeism and challenges for business continuity.

Some people will have influenza and COVID simultaneously ('flurona'). Vaccination for both will be protective to an important extent. Vaccination for both can be given at the same time; however, a single jab containing both will not be available for 2022.

Employee influenza vaccination programs

Many companies provide free flu vaccine to all employees. Some companies may consider providing vaccination to employee family members as well. In 2022, early rollout of flu vaccination will be helpful. Many people are eligible for free flu vaccine based on age or risk-based criteria in the National Immunisation Program.

Key risk management practice: Encourage and facilitate early take up of flu vaccinations for employees and consider offering vaccinations to family members.

East coast storms and floods

Health hazards

Storms and floods disrupt utilities, contaminate surfaces, increase relative humidity and promote mosquito breeding. Health risks following storm and flooding events include:

- Diarrhoea and gastrointestinal illness from failing wastewater treatment systems and contaminated bores, or from food spoiled by power outages
- Skin infections from exposure to flood waters, mud, and contaminated surfaces
- Exacerbation of asthma and respiratory infections from mould growth and poor air quality
- Mosquito-borne diseases from increased mosquito breeding, including Ross River fever and Japanese Encephalitis
- Increased risk of COVID-19 due to displacement of people and mass gatherings in evacuation centres or temporary accommodation, as well as low vaccination rates in some affected areas like the Northern Rivers
- Carbon monoxide poisoning from the use of gas generators
- Injury
- Mental health problems.

Air quality in buildings

Storms and floods create environments that are favourable to mould growth and poor air quality. People can be exposed to mould through inhalation, skin contact or ingestion, and is a particular concern for people with allergies, chronic illnesses and weak immune systems.

Moisture control and ventilation assessments should be included in a ventilation management plan to reduce the health risks associated with mould growth and poor air quality. Ventilation can be rapidly and cheaply assessed with a CO2 monitor and remediated cheaply where required, either through opening windows, adjustments in the heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system or use of a portable air purifier with high-efficiency particulate arrestance (HEPA) filter.

Water quality

Water quality, including ground and surface waters can vary greatly following a storm or flood event. Contaminants such as rubbish, sediment, animal wastes, fertilisers, pesticides, chemical spills and sewage can increase the risk from direct exposure as well as the contamination of source waters (e.g. bores and dams) used for drinking, commercial or agricultural purposes.

The identification, assessment and control of physical, chemical and biological hazards in ground and surface waters should be undertaken following a storm or flood event and incorporated into an ongoing water quality risk management plan.

Key risk management practice: Proactively assess air, water quality and mould growth on a systematic basis and treat as necessary. Actively monitor for other hazards and symptoms and respond to reduce risks.

Japanese encephalitis

Japanese Encephalitis (JE) is caused by a virus transmitted by the common *Culex* species of mosquito from animals (mainly pigs) to humans. *Culex tritaeniorhynchus* was not documented on the Australian mainland until mid-2021, and prior to 2022 JE outbreaks were confined to the Torres Strait Islands. The unprecedented spread of JE to animals and humans in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria in 2022 shows a major change in the mosquito ecology in Australia.

Vaccination

Most cases of JE in humans are asymptomatic or very mild. It cannot be passed from humans to other humans. Recent cases have been associated with commercial piggeries. People who live near piggeries or work in them are currently being offered vaccination against JE.

Mosquito control

The recent discovery of JE in Australian piggeries and human deaths from JE has limited exposure risk for most of the population outside piggeries or the adjacent areas and does not transmit from human to human; however, it does underscore the broader importance of avoiding mosquito bites and controlling mosquito numbers to reduce the risk of Ross River and other mosquito-borne diseases. The management practice of reducing water holding containers in which they could breed, around the home and around commercial buildings, is important in reducing the number of mosquitos that could carry disease.

Key risk management practice: Implement systematic mosquito controls to reduce breeding and take precautions against being bitten.

Responding to stress in the workforce

The stresses of the COVID pandemic and recent natural disasters have brought to the fore consideration of the mental health and wellbeing of everyone, including our employees. They have added to established concerns about burnout, work–life balance and workplace culture. In 2019, the WHO classified burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress.

The combination of issues is complex. The floods have greatly complicated COVID control in affected areas. On the other hand, the shift to hybrid work-from-home and office-based work that was forced by public health directions has had a positive effect on many employees' work–life balance and is likely to persist.

In 2022, organisations may add to their COVID-related health efforts by increasing their focus on wellness and stress management. Elements of an organisational wellness model can include leadership peer support programs that create a supportive environment, resiliency training, artificial intelligence applications ('AI-bots') that promote wellness, and leaders speaking openly about their own mental health needs.

Key risk management practice: Implement and actively manage proactive, comprehensive (COVID appropriate) occupational health and wellness programs.

Conclusion

We trust that this general health update on the Outlook for 2022 has been beneficial in highlighting health hazards and key risk management practices. If you require further tailored assistance in managing health risks in your organisation, please do not hesitate to make contact with Robyn Hendry, General Manager Global Advisory Services on rhendry@aspenmedical.com.

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