

The revised International Health Regulations

A single code of practices to prevent disease spread

The *International Health Regulations*, which are administered by WHO, are the only legally binding international instrument covering measures for preventing the transboundary spread of infectious diseases. They provide a single code of procedures and practices, including routine measures at airports and seaports, for preventing the importation of pathogens and vectors. They also set out roles and responsibilities, for WHO as well as for individual countries, for responding to a limited range of disease outbreaks. They contribute greatly to the use of uniform and effective protective measures both on a routine basis and in certain crisis situations.

The current regulations, in force since 1969, are now undergoing substantial revision to make them responsive to changes ushered in by the resurgence of the infectious disease threat, the increased volume and complexity of international travel and trade, and the widespread use of electronic communications. Whereas the current regulations prescribe measures for only three diseases (cholera, plague, and yellow fever), the revised regulations will provide a broader framework for protecting populations against the spread of infectious diseases and for adequately responding to all public health emergencies of international concern. Moreover, the revisions acknowledge that measures at border entry points alone are no longer adequate to protect populations against the spread of disease.

Strengthening alert and response

Many specific revisions address problems identified as WHO has worked to strengthen its outbreak alert and response activities, and are thus firmly grounded in practical experience. The revised regulations will strengthen procedures for rapidly gathering information, for determining when a disease event constitutes an international threat, and for seeking WHO assistance. New procedures for reporting are aimed to expedite the flow of information to WHO. Other provisions are designed to ensure that WHO receives timely and accurate information about public health emergencies of international concern so that recommendations and direct technical assistance, when needed, can be tailored to the event as it unfolds.

By following these procedures in times of crisis, national authorities can assure their populations that the appropriate measures, as recommended by WHO under provisions in the regulations, are being implemented. In addition, guidelines for determining which events potentially constitute a public health emergency of international concern will assist countries in notifying WHO. They should also help guard against excessive reactions in neighbouring countries to localized events with little risk of further spread.

Tools for the 21st century

Revisions also take into account the speed and widespread use of electronic communications, which mean that official government notifications of a disease event are frequently pre-empted by reports in the media or on the Internet. In May 2003, in response to SARS, WHO was formally authorized to use information sources, such as those searched by GPHIN,¹ other than government reports, and to issue global alerts when neighbouring countries or international public health are threatened by a disease event.

The *International Health Regulations* provide an essential legal framework for the sharing of urgent epidemiological information on transboundary spread of infectious diseases. Their revision will be another important step in strengthening the world's collective defences against the infectious disease threat.

¹Global Public Health Intelligence Network: a computer application, developed by Health Canada, that continuously crawls the Internet searching for hints of unusual disease events.





Further information on the International Health Regulations revision can be obtained from the Secretariat at WHO headquarters in Geneva

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