

**EU HEALTHY GATEWAYS JOINT ACTION**  
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**PREPAREDNESS AND ACTION AT POINTS OF ENTRY**  
**(PORTS, AIRPORTS, GROUND CROSSINGS)**

# **GUIDELINES FOR INTER-COUNTRY COMMUNICATION & INFORMATION FLOW IN OUTBREAK INVESTIGATIONS ON SHIPS & PUBLIC HEALTH EVENT MANAGEMENT**

## **Deliverable 9.4**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

This is **Deliverable 9.4** titled “**Guidelines for inter-country communication and information flow in outbreak investigations on ships and public health event management**”. This document describes:

- *The roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved in outbreak investigation on board ships.*
- *Suggestions for information flow, standardised information sharing and coordination of the response to public health events among the competent authorities in the European Union Member States (EUMS), the shipping companies, the ship officers and other stakeholders at a local and central level in countries as well as international level.*
- *Description of existing platforms for information sharing including the EU SHIPSAN information system (EUSIS) for communication at local level and Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) for communication at national level.*
- *Specific consideration about inter-country communication in regard to response measures, follow-up and decision for considering termination of a public health event.*

This document will be considered by the EU HEALTHY GATEWAYS joint action sustainability working group in order to determine the next steps forward for exploitation of the suggested inter-country communication guidelines.

## Background and Problem analysis

Public health events can occur on board ships as well as on land-based premises. As ships move rapidly from port to port, when a public health event occurs on board coordinated actions between ships and public health authorities are needed at the various ports of call. Although communication flows, networks and platforms for information exchange related to cross border public health events are well established in EUMS, competent authorities face challenges when dealing with public health events occurring on ships. Under the activities of the EU SHIPSAN ACT and EU HEALTHY GATEWAYS joint actions, the consortiums recognized that past outbreaks occurring on board ships sailing in EU countries’ waters were not always timely detected and/or adequately investigated.

The following facts challenge detection, risk assessment, implementation of response measures and follow-up of public health events on ships:

- Ships continuously sail from port to port within the same country or between countries. The normal communication flows of public health information used for land-based premises cannot be used for ship related events.
- Crew members and passengers travel to different destinations around the world upon disembarking. A disease diagnosis could be made after disembarkation.
- Ship routes are not always known, particularly in the case of cargo ships.
- The length of time in which ships are anchored at ports is insufficient for authorities to perform risk assessments and to observe/implement control measures.
- A high population turnaround on board passenger ships can pose a challenge when health measures must be taken to travellers.
- Competent authorities involved in detection, risk assessment, response measures and the legal framework related to ships, differ from those applied on land.

A ship's itinerary should be taken into consideration when scheduling the application of control measures and follow-up of events. If health measures should be taken to travelers and/or crew, the destination country must be informed.

Six **routes of communication** exist during outbreak investigations on ships and public health event management, depending on the severity of the event:

- a) Ship-to-port*
- b) Port-to-ship*
- c) Port-to-port*
- d) Port to national and sub-national level*
- e) National level to international level*
- f) National level to port*

Both port-to-port and (inter)national communication routes are indispensable. The port-to-port communication route is critical because local level authorities have immediate access onto ships and the competence of applying health measures; therefore, reliable and verified information can be rapidly shared with others. The (inter)national route can be used only when certain criteria are fulfilled, and consist of the formal channels that keep national authorities aligned and informed.

Currently, rules/framework/guidelines do not exist regarding: who coordinates the investigation of an outbreak on board ships that call ports in more than one EU country and/or an EU and non-EU country; what information about implemented measures is shared among competent authorities at the ports of call and how this information is shared; and who determines that the outbreak is over. Each country communicates information using different means and routes within the country, according to their national policies and structures. Public health events on ships may not fulfill the criteria to be reported through EWRS; however, port-to-port communication is essential. The different ports of call

in a ship's itinerary should use the same channels and means for communication and provide only correct and verified information. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the need for rapid information sharing among the ports of call in a ship's itinerary which are involved in event management on affected ships.

## Recommendations

### Channels of communication

Communication rules, regulations and practices may vary from country to country. It is important to use existing channels and frameworks of inter-country communication. Moreover, guidelines produced can be flexible to allow for various communication options, provided that all stakeholders can access the appropriate information. On-line web based platforms present advantages and provide an EU added value to public health information sharing.

### Coordinating a public health event

When a public health event occurs on board a ship calling different ports in EU countries, it is important that one of the authorities coordinates the public health response, informs all involved authorities regarding the outbreak investigation's outcome, prepares the investigation report and decides to close the public health event. The working group that developed the current guidelines suggests that for events on ships sailing in EU countries that **do not fulfill criteria** to be reported at EU level then the competent authority in the home port country could act as coordinator or when national rules require it the central level authority in the home port country could act as coordinator. If this option is not possible it is suggested that the port or central level authority in the country that identified the public health event could take on the role of coordinator. For public health response of events that **fulfill criteria to be reported at EU level** it is suggested that the central level authority in the country that identified the public health event acts as coordinator. If the central level authority in the country that identified the public health event cannot act as coordinator, then the central level authority in the country of the ship home port should take on the role of the coordinator. For public health events affecting more than one country and/or there is transmission not only on board ships but also in the community, then ECDC if asked by EU MS could coordinate the response to the event.

### Port-to-port communication

The local authorities at the ports of call should inform about any new evidence related to the event and response measures the relevant authorities within their country at local, sub-national and national levels and also update with this information the port-to-port communication platform (EU SHIPSAN Information System - EUSIS). EUSIS records data of ship inspections and data on management of public health events on ships (names of ships, hygiene inspection results, description of public health events on ships, names of ports and names of officers working in EU ports). The system enables ship-

to-port, port-to-national authorities and port-to-port communication. Moreover, read access is given to the national central level authorities, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the National Focal Points of ECDC networks, the European Commission and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Data are recorded by officers working at port health authorities in EU countries and by ship operators/Captains of ships sailing in the EU.

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