

Human-Animal Infections and Risk Surveillance group

The Joint human-animal infections and risk surveillance (HAIRS) group is a Health Protection Agency (HPA), Defra, Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency, Department of Health horizon scanning group chaired by the HPA's Department of Gastrointestinal, Emerging and Zoonotic Infections (GEZI). The Chair of the National Expert Panel on New and Emerging Infections (NEPNEI) and representatives from the Public Health Wales, Health Protection Scotland, Scottish Government, Public Health Agency Northern Ireland, and the Food Standards Agency also attend. The group meets every month and acts as a forum to identify and discuss infections with potential for interspecies transfer (particularly zoonotic infections).

If infections are thought to be of significance, they are included in the "Infectious Disease Surveillance and Monitoring System for Animal and Human Health: Summary of notable events/incidents of public health significance" which is produced monthly by the EIZ Section at HPA Colindale. This output is circulated to members of the NEPNEI (which includes the Chairs of the various Advisory Committees, representatives from the Devolved Administrations, Cabinet Office etc), Department of Health, to Directors and others working in related areas in the HPA, Defra departments and is placed on the HPA and Defra intranets.

Terms of Reference

The group is responsible for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The terms of reference of this group are still evolving but are currently:

1. Hazard Identification

To identify and review zoonotic or potentially zoonotic/interspecies infectious incidents which may pose a change in risk to animal or human health, whether these are acute clusters or outbreaks or increasing trends in reports of known or new infections or syndromes. If the incident discussed falls within the remit of another group, the HAIRS group will ensure that the relevant group is aware and considering the event. These incidents are identified using a variety of sources and can be within the UK or international.

2. Risk Assessment

If an infectious incident or trend has been identified, then the group discusses whether there might be a risk of interspecies transfer, which could pose a threat to animal or human public health. There are various levels of assessment and actions as outlined in annex 1 and the flow diagram.

If a member of the group considers an incident to be of high public health significance, then the HAIRS group will be convened as rapidly as possible to discuss the implications of the event and ensure all the relevant agencies are informed. Members of the HAIRS group will also act as focus through which concerns of these agencies/groups can be considered by the group.

Risk assessment is done using the expertise within the group or their network contacts. This allows incidents brought to the attention of the group considered to be of low public health importance to be "signed off" by the group.

3. Risk Management

Depending on the outcome of the risk assessment process, the HAIRS group may act as risk managers or refer issues to other groups for risk management action.

For issues assessed as low risk or where direct action is not warranted, the group may "sign off" or "risk manage" the incident, or continue to monitor the situation and reassess the risk at appropriate intervals.

For incidents assessed as being of potential threat to public health the group will alert appropriate groups to the situation and the need for risk management action. Members of the group will act as points of contact for the agencies and departments responsible for risk management. The HAIRS group then will not directly act as risk managers but may contribute advice and expertise to the risk management process.

4. Risk Communication

The group will contribute to the monthly “Infectious Disease Surveillance and Monitoring System for Animal and Human Health: Summary of notable events/incidents of public health significance” and be responsible for informing other agencies after assessing the change in risk as outlined in the annex. The group will be responsible for writing up and communicating the conclusions and recommendations of any expert qualitative risk assessment process. This information will be communicated to members of the NEPNEI and UK Zoonoses and Animal Diseases and Infections Group (UKZADI) through circulation of the HAIRS group minutes.

Risk Assessment Process by the Human Animal Infections and Risk Surveillance Group

Incidents* are raised by a member of the group, discussed and:

- a) Considered to be of negligible potential risk to public health → no action apart from being minuted.
- b) Considered to be of negligible or little potential risk for interspecies transfer, but included in the monthly output for interest or information. However, the group will continue to monitor the situation.
- c) More information is needed in order to assess the incident. The group produces background information and briefing papers in order that a preliminary assessment can be undertaken. Other members of the zoonoses network or other contacts may be consulted at this stage. Where UK animal surveillance profiles are available these will be used. After reviewing this information, an incident can be assessed as negligible or low change in risk to public health on the basis of the current information. This decision would be recorded in the monthly output and the situation would continue to be monitored.
- d) If considered that there is the potential for zoonotic or interspecies transfer either immediately or after reviewing further information, the group will then establish whether there needs to be a formal qualitative risk assessment by an expert group. If a formal risk assessment is thought to be necessary, the group will convene this and be responsible for informing other bodies, agencies and individuals eg Department of Health, NEPNEI, UK Zoonoses and Animal Diseases and Infections group, Food Standards Agency, Executive Group HPA, Defra, Chief Medical Officer(s), Chief Veterinary Officer(s) etc. The expert group will include relevant national and international experts in animal and human health and will use an agreed risk assessment algorithm which has been approved by UK ZADI. If the group considers the incident to be of high public health significance, an expert group will be convened as soon as possible.
- e) The group will be responsible for writing up and communicating the conclusions and recommendations of the expert group.

* “incidents” include acute clusters or outbreaks or increasing trends in reports of known or new infections or syndromes

Process of risk assessment by Human-Animal Infections and Risk Surveillance Group

