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Report on the monitoring of zoonoses and food-borne disease outbreaks

Data for 2020

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Summary

In 2020, which was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers of cases of zoonotic disease reported in humans declined across the board. This mainly concerned the pathogens *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella* and Shigatoxin-forming *Escherichia coli* (STEC). Depending on the disease, a different combination of influences may have been responsible for the observed decrease in case numbers. On the one hand, actual case numbers may have been under-recorded due to systemic healthcare factors (e.g. workload of laboratories and medical staff, the public's reluctance to attend medical facilities), leading to a reduction in reported cases despite the actual incidence remaining the same. On the other hand, the prescribed COVID-19 measures, travel restrictions and changes in individual behaviour (e.g. improved hand hygiene, altered eating habits) may have influenced the transmission of other pathogens as well. The COVID-19 pandemic may therefore have led to a de facto reduction in zoonotic infections. To assess the progression of reported human cases correctly, it will be essential to see how case numbers develop after the COVID-19 pandemic has receded.

In 2020, campylobacteriosis was again the most commonly reported zoonosis in humans, although the case numbers confirmed by laboratory diagnosis (6,200) were lower than in the previous year (7,223). In most cases, humans are infected by contaminated food. The bacterium occurs naturally in the gut of chickens but does not pose a threat to their health.

In the case of salmonellosis, which remains the second most reported zoonotic disease in Switzerland, 1,270 laboratory-confirmed cases were recorded in humans in 2020 (compared with 1,546 in the previous year). The number of salmonellosis cases in animals increased slightly, from 90 to 99. The main animals affected were cattle, reptiles, dogs and cats.

STEC infections also showed a decline in case numbers, falling to 728 from 999. From 2014 to 2019, case numbers had risen steadily, largely due to an increase in testing thanks to new techniques, resulting in more frequent identification of cases. This rising trend has been curbed for now.

In contrast, the 58 confirmed cases of listeriosis reported to the FOPH in 2020 were within the usual observed range, despite a 22-case outbreak in the first half of the year. Using whole-genome sequencing (WGS), these cases were assigned to a specific cluster, which was first identified in 2018 (12 cases). Food from a particular cheese producer was identified as the likely source of infection.

Very few food-borne disease outbreaks are recorded in Switzerland. In 2020, 13 such incidents were reported. This is below the previous year's figure (23 incidents) but within the annual range. In total, more than 161 people were affected, at least 36 were hospitalised and there were 10 deaths..