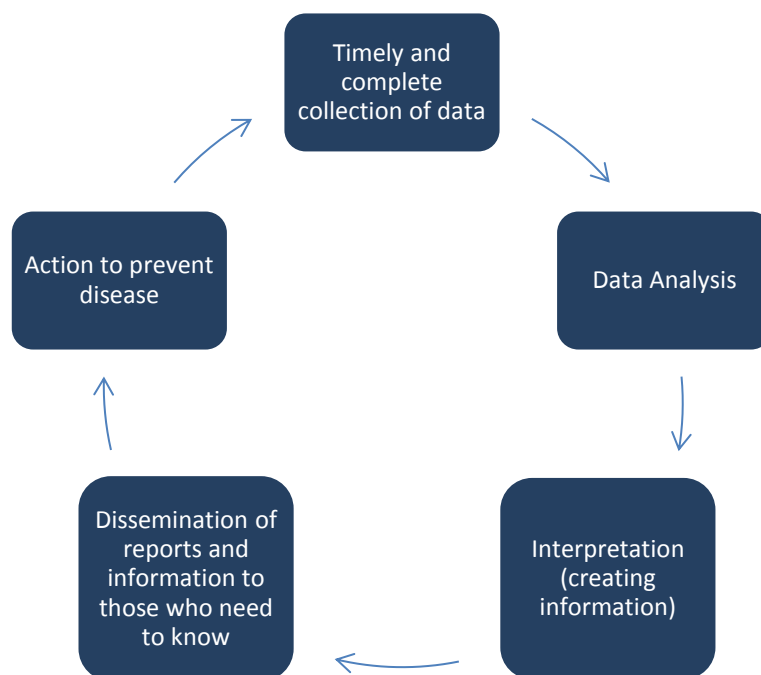


PUBLIC HEALTH SURVEILLANCE – AN OVERVIEW

DEFINITION

Surveillance is defined as “systematic ongoing collection, collation, and analysis of data, and the timely dissemination of information to those who need to know so that action can be taken.”¹ Routine surveillance can be illustrated as a cycle of steps:



Surveillance is considered to be a cycle since data are collected, analyzed, interpreted, and the findings are disseminated so that public health action can be taken to prevent disease. From here, the cycle begins again in order to assess whether the public health action was effective in preventing disease.

Provincial and District public health officials rely on a variety of partners to report the occurrence of notifiable diseases and conditions to provincial and local public health services. Without such data, unusual occurrences of diseases might not be detected, trends cannot be accurately monitored, and the effectiveness of intervention activities cannot be easily evaluated.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of public health communicable disease surveillance is to identify notifiable diseases and conditions in the province so that prevention and control measures can be applied both effectively and efficiently to minimize the burden of illness. Surveillance data must be timely and complete to accurately reflect the occurrence and distribution of disease.

¹ Last, J.M. (Ed). A dictionary of Epidemiology, Fourth Edition. Oxford University Press, United States, 2001.

Additional purposes of surveillance include the following:

- Describe trends and the natural history of a condition
- Detect outbreaks or epidemics of disease
- Provide details about patterns of disease occurrence
- Monitor changes in disease agents through laboratory testing
- Plan and set priorities for health programs
- Inform evaluation of control and prevention measures
- Detect changes in health practices
- Evaluate hypotheses about disease occurrence
- Detect rare but significant causes of disease