



SUMMARY

For the second year in a row, ESCAIDE was held as a hybrid event, bringing people together in-person and continuing to provide online access. Here, we talk you through the sessions and discussions across the three days of ESCAIDE 2023, which took place from 22-24 November in Barcelona and online.

ESCAIDE 2023 Highlights Report

A look back on the conference

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ESCAIDE at a glance

The European Scientific Conference on Applied Infectious Disease Epidemiology (ESCAIDE) is an annual event organised by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), a public health agency of the European Union (EU), headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. ECDC's ambition is to protect the over 500 million people in Europe from infectious diseases.

ECDC organises ESCAIDE every year to be a platform for...

- **sharing** of scientific **knowledge and experience** in all areas applied to infectious disease prevention and control
 - discussing and debating **scientific advances** and **current public health challenges**
 - **strengthening and expanding** the **human network** of all involved in this field in Europe and globally
 - providing opportunities for further **professional development** for fellows and students in this field.
- ...to strengthen the prevention and control of infectious diseases in the EU/EEA and globally.

ESCAIDE is a conference for the entire community of scientists and professionals dedicated to infectious disease prevention and control, in the EU/EEA and globally, including epidemiologists, microbiologists, clinicians, public health professionals, communication specialists, modelers, statisticians, social scientists and policy makers.

It has been held since 2007 as an in-person conference, with rotational hosting between Stockholm and another city in an EU/EEA Member State. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ESCAIDE 2020 and 2021 were held entirely online, live-streamed on an interactive online platform.

In 2022 ESCAIDE was held for the first time as a hybrid event, bringing people back together again in-person, but continuing to provide online access. ESCAIDE 2023 similarly took place as a hybrid event, hosted in Barcelona and online.



[Visit the ESCAIDE website](#)



ESCAIDE 2023 hybrid 22-24 November, in Barcelona and online

ESCAIDE 2023 had almost 800 participants gathering in-person across the three days at the Palau de Congressos de Barcelona, in Spain, and over 2900 people registering to join online. ESCAIDE has grown hugely in recent years, with the increased prominence of the field during the COVID-19 pandemic, and accessibility of online events. We were pleased to see that the interest in attending ESCAIDE this year remained high, and that, after the success of ESCAIDE 2022, conducting the conference in hybrid allowed the larger audience that were captured during the online editions to still participate. Continuing to offer online participation means that the conference was still accessible to the audience, presenters and speakers who could not travel to Barcelona due to cost, distance, and other commitments, or be accommodated in the capacity of the venue.

ESCAIDE 2023 registered participants indicated they were from 29 countries inside EU/EEA (2623) and from 98 countries outside EU/EEA (1144).

The programme was more packed than ever and included 5 Plenaries, 11 Fireside sessions, 24 Poster tours, side events, info stands and many other activities. For many, this was the chance to reconnect and network with colleagues, to take the time to learn from one another's work, and exchange experiences from the past year. The conference allowed for meaningful discussions to take place, on topics directly related to infectious disease epidemiology, but also on the camaraderie and wellbeing of the public health workforce.

Read on to see the highlights of the events and discussions across the three days of ESCAIDE 2023.



[Consult the ESCAIDE 2023 Programme](#)

Wednesday 22 November Day 1

The first day of ESCAIDE opened with a warm welcome from Andrea Ammon, the Director of ECDC, as well as representatives from the host country: Fernando Simón (Spanish Ministry of Health), Carmen Cabezas (Catalan Public Health Agency), and Manel Balcells (Catalan Councillor of Health).

This was followed by the first plenary, which focused on revisiting the concept of prevention for communicable diseases. It was chaired by ESCAIDE Scientific Committee members John Kinsman (ECDC) and Petronille Bogaert (European Commission) and featured three speakers with different experiences on the importance and application of prevention in public health, including lessons to be learnt from non-communicable diseases. Some of the discussed topics included how to maintain people's confidence in vaccination, the relevance of timely and reliable data collection to gain knowledge and ensure evidence-based policy making, and how to create engaging platforms to raise awareness on prevention.

Emilie Karafillakis (University of Antwerp, Belgium) shared her experience researching vaccine confidence and training public health professionals in how to communicate about vaccination, while Hanna Tolonen (THL, Finland) stressed the importance of sharing all potential data sources, from demographics to behavioural science. The founder of the NGO Loono, Kateřina Šedová, encouraged the audience to keep communication engaging and spoke about her work creating health literacy campaigns and empowering medical students in Czechia.



The speakers and moderators of Plenary A discussed various aspects of prevention for communicable diseases.

“Let’s face it: prevention is boring – we need to find an engaging way to communicate, find the point of interest of our audience, use their language, be positive, break taboos and use storytelling.” – Kateřina Šedová, physician and founder of Loono, speaking in Plenary A on how to communicate about prevention

After a short coffee break, participants reconvened for two Fireside sessions, presenting abstracts that were submitted in the fields of surveillance and COVID-19 Vaccinations. Fireside 2 showcased five national and European Vaccine Effectiveness (VE) studies, which are key to evaluate performance of vaccines, and to address gaps in evidence from clinical trials (including effectiveness in subgroups, long-term effectiveness, and effectiveness of booster doses). The overall conclusion was that valid, rigorous and long-term funded observational VE studies are key to guide the adaptation of vaccination programmes and policy decisions for new and existing vaccines, and they should be a part of pandemic preparedness.

During the lunch break, a group of onsite participants enjoyed a guided tour of the nearby National Art Museum of Catalonia, while others took part in a side event titled "Follow the science: follow the song" in which they were lead in acapella singing and took a moment to recharge. Online and onsite attendees also had the opportunity to attend the Career Compass. Here, a panel of public health professionals from various institutes gathered to speak about the importance of curiosity, adaptability, resilience, courage to take different paths and daring to reach out and network.

This was followed by another two Fireside sessions, one on food and water-borne diseases and the other on sexually and community acquired infections, including HIV. The first set of 8 Poster tours took place after this, covering diverse topics such as antimicrobial resistance, tuberculosis, the surveillance of STIs, and various aspects of COVID-19. Regarding this latter topic, in the words of one of the moderators, "We thought everyone was bored of COVID, but the attendance at the COVID-19 surveillance poster session proved us wrong".



Fireside sessions were composed of 7-minute oral presentations on a specific topic, followed by a Q&A, moderated by an expert in that field.

This year's Social Sciences side event examined the history of infectious disease pandemics in Europe. Through the examples of the 14th century plague, the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, speakers highlighted the lessons learnt for prevention and control measures.

Day 1's final plenary covered digital transformation within public health and the challenges and possibilities posed by Artificial Intelligence. Both sides of the very current debate were addressed, with speakers John Brownstein (Harvard Medical School, Canada) and Joanna Goodey (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights), discussing the value of generative AI in cutting costs and enabling the practice of public health, as well as the risks associated with the information and capacity to use AI tools. The importance of an EU-wide AI Act, which is currently being negotiated, to ensure compliance to fundamental rights within the EU was emphasised. The panellists concluded that the current digital transformation comes with both anxiety and excitement and should be addressed through multisectoral partnerships.

“AI can be used for good, but only if we address the bad first.” – Joanna Goodey, Head of research for Justice, Digital and Migration at the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, speaking in Plenary B on AI and the digital transformation of Public Health

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How can generative AI be used at in public health?

1 Alleviation of pain points
Generative AI can be used to alleviate time-consuming or tedious digital tasks that could benefit from automation

Types of pain points well-suited for generative AI solutions include:

- Time-consuming tasks involving digital systems
- Challenges navigating large amounts of information

2 Administrative or clinical innovation
Generative AI can enhance specific tasks or workflows, especially where written or visual content creation is needed

Innovative applications of generative AI to enhance ways of working include:

- Analysis of large datasets
- Generating or translating written or visual content
- Personalizing content or responses

John Brownstein
Chief Innovation Officer, Professor
Harvard Medical School, US

Chief Innovation Officer of Boston Children's Hospital, John Brownstein, discussed how AI is already being used in public health.

The day ended with a daily wrap-up session, where three onsite participants were invited to share their thoughts on the conference so far. One of these participants was one of the recipients of the Funding Initiative. This year, 3 early-career abstract presenters were supported by ECDC to attend the conference in-person, where they gathered to meet and share their work. They gave presentations in Fireside sessions and Poster tours throughout the conference, on topics including the modelling of SARS-CoV-2 transmission patterns (by Carla Molina Grané), cross-border contact tracing in Europe (by Olivia Lewis), and household transmission of the Omicron variant (by Bianca Klee).



[Read more about the Funding Initiative](#)

Thursday 23 November Day 2

The second day of ESCAIDE started a plenary on wastewater surveillance, discussing its limitations, concerns, and benefits. Márta Vargha, chief counsellor at the National Center for Public Health and Pharmacy, Hungary, explained the cost-effectiveness of this type of data, which can provide information that traditional surveillance may fail to capture, such as infections among asymptomatic people. She also noted that wastewater surveillance needs to be more public health-driven rather than research-driven and presented the related EU joint action WISH.

Paul Griffiths, Scientific Director of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, spoke about drug monitoring in wastewater systems and provided a historical overview of drug wastewater surveillance, emphasising the importance of not over- or underselling the message of wastewater monitoring. Lastly, Marion Koopmans, a virologist from the Erasmus MC in the Netherlands, approached wastewater surveillance from the perspective of the genomics revolution and highlighted the great potential of metagenomics in surveillance.

“The motto in the wastewater surveillance community is: ‘Not everyone gets tested, but everyone uses the toilet.’” – Márta Vargha, chief counsellor at the National Center for Public Health and Pharmacy, Hungary, speaking in Plenary C on the benefits of wastewater surveillance



Marion Koopmans, the head of the Erasmus MC Department of Viroscience, presented the advances in metagenomics in surveillance.

The two morning Fireside sessions brought together abstract presentations on the topics of trends, outcomes and patterns in disease surveillance, and health promotion and disease prevention. The lunchtime side session was organised by representatives of the European Health Union. The panel of speakers explored new

developments for an integrated surveillance system under the European Health Union and the EU Regulation on Serious Cross-border Threats to Health (SCBTH). During the session, Dirk Meusel (European Commission) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted shortcomings of European surveillance systems, emphasising the need for a more integrated and sustainable surveillance system across the EU. As a response, different systems are being implemented to bring together the complex systems and networks of surveillance across countries.

This was followed by the *Eurosurveillance* seminar, on the topic of “Changing urban environments and impact on infectious disease epidemiology, surveillance, prevention and control”. The seminar addressed both benefits and potential hazards of urban greening policies. On one hand, some of the presented positive aspects of this urban change included improvements in mental health, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. On the other, identified potential harmful effects included the levels of pollen emission, conflicting interactions between humans and wildlife, and a potential increase of arthropods-borne diseases like dengue or leishmaniasis.



The Eurosurveillance Seminar examined potential risks and benefits of greener urban environments, using insights from infectious disease epidemiology and strategic foresight.

Further abstract presentations took place on Day 2 during a Fireside session on respiratory infections, and Poster tours on emerging diseases, One Health, implementation science, mpox, genome sequencing, and more. This year's late breaker abstracts were also presented as posters. These included abstracts on a pseudo-outbreak of *Bordetella parapertussis*, a norovirus outbreak at an all-inclusive resort, the impact of *Streptococcus* group A, the prevalence of diphtheriae in refugee and the emerging approach on wastewater surveillance. This latter abstract received a high number of questions regarding the application of environmental surveillance for public health purposes.



[Browse the ESCAIDE 2023 Abstract book](#)



Throughout the conference, participants could visit onsite (and online) info stands to learn more about different projects and initiatives.

The afternoon side session focussed on how risk communication, community engagement and infodemic management (RCCE-IM) can save lives through success stories conveyed by representatives from a number of organisations and academic institutions. The audience asked many questions about how to deal with conspiracy theorists, and how to conduct social listening in the most effective way – starting with understanding what people think and perceive.

“Health literacy is the single element that we need to build for the next big emergency.” – **Cristiana Salvi**, WHO Regional Office for Europe, speaking in the side event on risk communication and community engagement

The second day concluded with the plenary session on One Health. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) was repeatedly cited as a clear public health emergency that should be addressed through a One Health approach. Speakers included Sandra Gallina, Director-General for Health and Food Safety of the European Commission, Greg Martin, Director of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre in Ireland, Karen Saylor, CEO of the NGO Labyrinth Global Health, and Stef Bronzwaer, Research Coordinator at the European Food Safety Agency.

There were several key takeaways from this session. Firstly, there is a need for unity in the One Health approach, with participants stressing the importance of breaking down silos and fostering collaboration across

various sectors. Secondly, it is essential to raise awareness regarding our collective role in addressing health challenges, and the plenary emphasised actions that individuals and communities can take. The potential role of AI in identifying new drugs and therapeutical solutions against infections was also addressed. Lastly, speakers emphasised that AMR is an urgent issue that should not be a silent pandemic but rather be recognised as a costly one, requiring significant investment in One Health initiatives.

“We need to expand the recognition of One Health to other sciences, like social sciences, breaking down silos. We need to be more universal.” – Sandra Gallina, Director-General for Health and Food Safety at the European Commission, speaking in Plenary D on global approaches to tackling One Health challenges



The speakers and moderators of plenary D shared their experiences working in One Health.

For those participants in Barcelona, the day closed with a lively and engaging BarCamp. This was an opportunity to network and exchange ideas in a relaxed setting. Participants submitted topics in advance and voted for their favourites. The topics discussed included whether the public and media attention on infectious disease epidemiology during the COVID-19 pandemic have actually increased understanding about public health, and what is meant by “pandemic preparedness”. Participants also shared some personal experiences and anecdotes about the difficulties they faced during the pandemic response.



The attendance and engagement at this year's BarCamp was as high as ever.



[See the ESCAIDE 2023 side events](#)

Friday 24 November Day 3

The third day of ESCAIDE opened with this year's final plenary, focusing on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the public health workforce, and the lessons learned. Lucy Easthope (Durham University, UK), Katarzyna Czabanowska (Maastricht University, the Netherlands) and Giorgio Grossi (Karolinska Institutet, Sweden) discussed the struggles that the public health workforce is facing in post-pandemic times, including poor work conditions and burnout, and highlighted the important steps to tackle these issues, such as mental health support, as well as better and more compassionate leadership.

The importance of acknowledging that there is a crisis, showing vulnerability while also being strong, and recognising clinical exhaustion were some of the key messages that emerged during the session. Giorgio Grossi's presentation on burnout was so well received that we re-recorded the entirety of his speech to make it available for participants to re-watch.

"A new type of leadership, compassionate leadership, is needed! Compassionate leaders are not weak, they captivate hearts and deliver results." – Katarzyna Czabanowska, Professor in Public Health Leadership and Workforce Development at Maastricht University, speaking in Plenary E on the future of the Public Health workforce



The speakers and moderators of Plenary E discussed the post-COVID-19 future of the public health workforce.

Following the coffee break, two Fireside sessions shined the spotlight on research on healthcare-associated infections and various issues related to global health. During lunch, participants once again had the opportunity to sing together in the “Refresh and recharge session”, as well as take part in much anticipated Escape Room. This session was a gamified experience of the challenges refugees face in their migration journeys.

The next side session, on public health intelligence, discussed current tools, development activities and challenges within public health intelligence driven by ECDC, JRC, Africa CDC and WHO. One of the tools discussed was EIOS (Epidemic Intelligence from Open Sources initiative).

The afternoon fireside sessions focussed on modelling and biostatistics, as well as a second group of late breaker abstracts. Some of the topics in the former session included the use of open data and statistics to improve beach water quality detection systems, the invisible transmission chains of COVID-19 in schools, and flight travel bans in the wake of Omicron’s arrival. The late breakers included presentations on new or important findings about botulism cases, HIV, diphtheria, avian flu, Salmonella outbreak and Crimean Congo Haemorrhagic fever.

In the final side session of the conference, speakers from WHO – Hannah Lewis, Isabel Bergeri and Gina Samaan – discussed how to better prepare for the next pandemic. The panellists highlighted the importance of collaboration and vaccination, but also considered the risks of exclusively focusing on pandemic preparedness. A new initiative by WHO called PRET: ‘Preparedness and Resilience for Emerging Threats’ was also introduced.



Poster tours brought together a series of short oral presentations on a specific topic, followed by a moderated Q&A session.

The last poster tours included presentations on surveillance strategies, waterborne outbreaks, vaccination, and infectious diseases in different at-risk populations such as residents of long-term care facilities and children in childcare settings.

The conference closed with a final wrap-up and the closing ceremony. Awards were presented to the winners of the EAN photo contest and the best oral presentation, which concerned the effectiveness of booster doses in protecting against COVID-19 infection during the Omicron waves in the UK. In their closing address, ECDC Director Andrea Ammon and Chief Scientist Mike Catchpole reflected on the history of ESCAIDE and discussed their hopes for the future of the conference, as this was their last ESCAIDE before their retirement.



Together with the Master of Ceremonies, Andrea Ammon and Mike Catchpole wrapped up the final day of ESCAIDE 2023.

“Every ESCAIDE brings non-mainstream topics into the debate. The group that we have here is not only passionate but willing to work for the better health of people. The enthusiasm is infectious.” –

Andrea Ammon, ECDC Director, in her closing speech for ESCAIDE 2023



[Read more about ESCAIDE future hosting sites](#)

Engagement and social media

From early on Day 1, through to the end of Day 3, there was a brilliant atmosphere at the conference, with packed audiences at sessions and participants noticeably pleased to be meeting in-person again. The attendance and participation online were high throughout. Many questions and comments were sent by participants during sessions through the app.

Networking took place in-person, during the coffee breaks, at the end of sessions, at lunch, and in events such as the networking cocktail. Online participants took part in discussions through the conference platform, both during and between sessions.

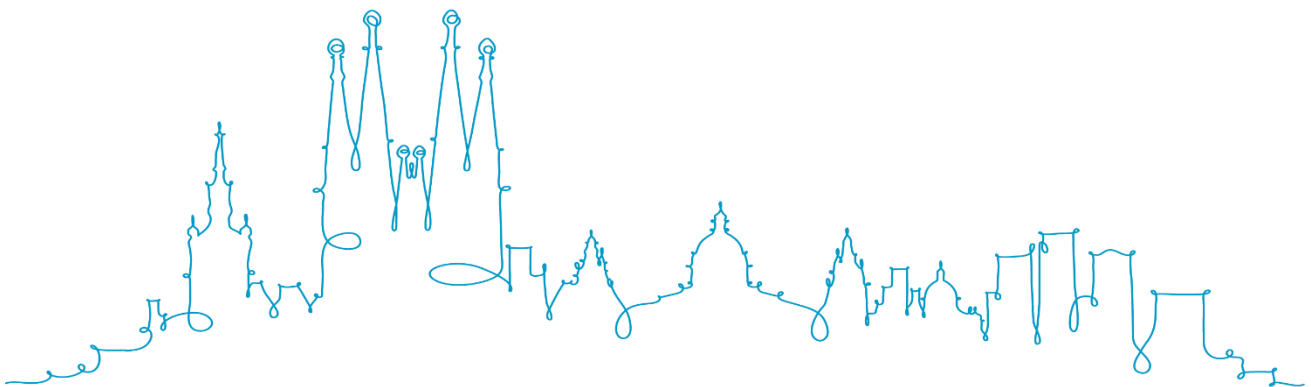
There was a buzz on social media around ESCAIDE, which could be seen on the Social Media wall displayed in the venue and online. It was great to see participants sharing their personal highlights, promoting their presentations and making connections, through a variety of social media platform.

Feedback survey

The feedback survey closed on 11 December. Thank you to all who contributed, we have reviewed your responses and appreciate the time taken to give specific feedback. This has helped us to understand the experience of ESCAIDE 2023 of attendees, speakers, presenters, moderators and organisers, and online and in-person attendees.

Over 1000 responses were submitted, with overwhelmingly positive feedback – 93% of respondents indicated they were 'extremely' or 'very much' satisfied with the event. Similar to the feedback received in previous years, respondents appreciated the hybrid nature of the conference, which allowed many to participate remotely, and revisit the content afterwards. In-person participants were generally pleased with the venue choice and organisation, although we take note of the suggestions for improving the catering. We also acknowledge that many wished for more time to be allocated to discussions, but that many respondents also appreciated the opportunities to rest, recharge and connect individually with other participants during the breaks.

The full analysis of the feedback survey results will be available in the Evaluation Report, which will be published on our website early 2024.



Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the ESCAIDE 2023 Rapporteurs who worked hard throughout the conference to capture the content of sessions and lively discussions, which enabled us to produce this Highlights Report. We offer huge thanks to the session speakers, abstract presenters, moderators, Scientific Committee members, side event organisers and info stand support, for your contributions to the diverse conference programme.

This year's ESCAIDE was distinguished by the exceptional partnership with our host country, Spain. We extend our heartfelt thanks to Jacobo Mendirioz from the Catalan Public Health Agency for his vital role in the Scientific Committee, to Esteve Saltó Cerezuela for expertly handling the pre-conference organisation and media relations, and to Berta Suarez for her coordination within the Spanish Ministry of Health. We are also very grateful to our hosts for enriching the conference with additional experiences, such as the guided tours at the MNAC and the engaging Escape Room event. Special recognition is due to Fernando Simón and Carmen Cabezas from the Spanish Ministry of Health and the Catalan Public Health Agency, respectively, for their outstanding support and the resources provided by their teams.

Last but not least, ESCAIDE is what it is because of the engagement of the audience – there were floods of questions and comments this year, from both the in-person and online audience. Thank you for your participation!



[Read more about the pre-conference sessions](#)

Stay tuned and get involved in ESCAIDE 2024!

Follow @ESCAIDE on social media and check out the website to stay up to date with news and announcements throughout the year.

Subscribe to ESCAIDE newsletter by sending an email to escaide.conference@ecdc.europa.eu.

Submissions for abstracts to ESCAIDE 2024 will be opened again in the spring.

See you at ESCAIDE 2024! In Stockholm and online, 20-22 November.



Registered participants can access the [online platform and view all session recordings](#)



[Visit the ESCAIDE 2023 archive](#)



[View ESCAIDE 2023 photos](#)