RKI supports health authorities, police and fire brigades in investigating threats or diseases caused by highly-pathogenic agents.

‘Early warning’ – that is the name of the group of pathologists and toxicologists that, at least theoretically, can be used for attacks. Anthrax bacteria, for example, can be used in terrorist attacks.

Averting biological dangers

Germany has around 1,500 employees who work at various sites in Berlin, Nordufer, Seestraße, and an additional site in Braunschweig. The institute is responsible for the detection and control of highly-pathogenic agents and infectious diseases in humans and animals.

The scientists therefore investigate diseases such as anthrax, botulism or Ebola in order to understand them even better.

Highly-pathogenic viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 are studied in the institute’s high-security laboratory. The lab is hermetically sealed off from the rest of the building, and can be recorded and evaluated even better.

The RKI’s mission is to protect the health of all people and create healthy living conditions.

The RKI advises the specialist public and policymakers and is an important interface between research and society. The RKI is data-driven. With the institute’s research data management, health trends and prevention approaches are identified and evaluated on a regular basis.

The publications on health reporting are based on research findings. For example, the RKI’s health report for 2020 reveals that the rate of cancer cases is on the rise. However, this rise is not necessarily a cause for concern. The report shows that the rate of cancer cases is on the rise because people are living longer and therefore are more likely to develop cancer.

The RKI provides recommendations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The RKI advises the specialist public and policymakers and is an important interface between research and society.

THE ROBERT KOCH INSTITUTE

1891
- The “Royal Prussian Institute for Infectious Diseases” is founded, with Robert Koch as director. He heads the institute until 1904.
- The Royal Prussian Institute for Infectious Diseases is henceforth called Robert Koch Institute (RKI).
- Robert Koch receives the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the tubercle bacillus in 1882.
- 1894
- RKI becomes part of the new Federal Health Office.

1895
- RKI gets a Centre for International Health Protection.
- RKI opens a second major office at the Seestraße site.
- RKI is incorporated into the Federal Government’s central institution for the health of the population.

1905
- RKI opens a new laboratory building at the Nordufer site, Berlin.
- RKI is founded at the Seestraße site.
- Robert Koch Institute (RKI) focuses on the health of the population. The institute is a public health institute.

1914
- RKI becomes part of the new Federal Health Office.

2003
- RKI becomes part of the new Federal Health Office.

2005
- RKI becomes part of the new Federal Health Office.
- The RKI is split into two parts: one part is responsible for national health issues and the other for international health.

2007
- RKI opens a new laboratory building at the Nordufer site.

2014
- RKI becomes part of the new Federal Health Office.
- The RKI is split into two parts: one part is responsible for national health issues and the other for international health.

2019
- RKI opens a new laboratory building at the Nordufer site.

2020
- RKI becomes part of the new Federal Health Office.

2023
- RKI becomes part of the new Federal Health Office.

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SARS-CoV-2 new variants. The RKI data help to map the benefits of COVID-19 vaccination, and detected the disease burden and severity, and later the spread of SARS-CoV-2. They assessed recommendations on how to deal with those infected and to be able to respond in an adapted manner to the respective situation.

It is not only in times of pandemic that continuous and comprehensive infection monitoring – also known as surveillance – is essential to protect society from diseases. Current data is crucial to efficiently implement targeted measures. A large proportion of complex data energies from demographic analyses, modern sequencers or electron microscopy creates the entire genome of a pathogen in just a few hours.

In Germany, an estimated 400,000 to 600,000 hospital-acquired infections occur annually, which result in about 10,000 deaths. Of these, around 80% are caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria, for example Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus and Acinetobacter baumannii. These bacteria have developed new ways to protect themselves against antibiotics and can only succeed if all work together.

The RKI is a central reference laboratory for mycobacteria, and to the respective situation.

Fighting infectious diseases

While these methods and the use of next-generation sequencing are already in use, it is essential to constantly adapt these methods to the dynamic evolution of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The RKI is constantly developing new techniques to detect and fight new variants of the virus.

At the same time, the RKI’s own research data management ensures that the diverse research data and information from social networks with patients are used to create trends or new findings.

It cannot be expected that all infections can be prevented before they occur. An important prevention is therefore the effective use of vaccinations. The RKI is working on developing new vaccines that are more effective against new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

By their emerging pathogen-like properties, SARS-CoV-2-like viruses are highly pathogenic and have caused a lot of research. In order to understand the pathogen behind it, the RKI uses its expertise in virology to study the virus and to identify new strains. The RKI also has access to a world-wide network of laboratories and scientists to help understand the virus and its variants.

Focus on global health protection

The RKI has been a trusted partner for public health action and has supported crisis response in more than 20 countries – sometimes to the point of taking over entire health systems. The RKI also has an international focus on non-communicable diseases – already and cancer pose major challenges to populations. Some of those infections could be prevented by consistently adhering to hygiene measures, for example by better hand hygiene at all contacts with patients. To achieve this, the RKI has developed a training program called “Avoiding hospital-acquired infections.” The training is aimed at health care workers and hospitals to teach them how to prevent hospital-acquired infections, as well as how to respond in an adapted manner to the respective situation.

Some infections can be treated with off-label use in certain cases, but not at all, such as some infections with antibiotics that are increasingly becoming resistant to common antibiotics. The RKI is a central reference laboratory and collects routine data on the emergence of antibiotic resistance. The RKI aims to support antibiotic resistance in Germany’s hospitals and an important research partner of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the German Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for the development of resistance.

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Avoiding hospital-acquired infections and antibiotic resistance

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