

1 ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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3 **Tick-borne encephalitis (TBE) in Switzerland: does the prolongation of**
4 **vaccine booster intervals result in an increased risk of breakthroughs?**

5 Running title: TBE-vaccine breakthroughs in Switzerland (40 letters and spaces)

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27

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29 **KEY WORDS**

30 Tick-Borne Diseases; Vaccine-Preventable Diseases; Immunization; Immunization
31 Programs; Immunosenescence; Serology; Memory

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34

35 **ABBREVIATIONS**

36 FOPH Federal Office of Public Health

37 IgG Immune globulin G

38 TBE Tick-borne encephalitis

39 Y Years

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40 **ABSTRACT**

41 Background: In 2006, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health decided
42 recommending a prolongation of vaccine booster intervals after the 3rd dose for the
43 prevention of tick-borne encephalitis (TBE) from 3 to 10 years.

44 Methods: To ascertain whether this amendment resulted in an increased rate of
45 vaccine breakthroughs we conducted a retrospective analysis of surveillance data
46 collected 2000–2019 by mandatory reporting to the Swiss Federal Office of Public
47 Health (FOPH). Fractions of breakthroughs (with 95% confidence intervals) — 0 to 3
48 years vs. >3 to 10 years after the 3rd vaccination dose — were compared across time
49 periods and age groups.

50 Results: Among 3,205 notified TBE cases, known vaccination status was reported in
51 2,562 (79.9%), including 103 patients with ≥ 3 vaccine doses (4.0%). Among those,
52 there were 39 patients who had received the last dose within 3 years and 48 patients
53 in the >3 to 10 years group. Accordingly, the annual breakthrough rate was 7.7 cases
54 during the first three years after the last dose, and 5.4 cases in following seven years.
55 We observed no significant trend of TBE breakthroughs with increasing age.
56 Increasing numbers of TBE and of vaccine breakthroughs over time have been
57 associated with spreading endemicity and higher vaccination coverage in Switzerland.

58 Conclusions: there is no indication that extended booster intervals resulted in an
59 increased rate of breakthroughs, but there was a marked public health benefit with
60 respect to increased acceptability of TBE immunization in the general population.

61

62 240 words, MAX 300

63 Introduction

64 Despite increasing endemicity of tick-borne encephalitis (TBE), vaccination coverage
65 in Switzerland is relatively low, particularly when compared with neighbouring Austria
66 where TBE immunization is recommended already for infants.¹ According to a survey
67 conducted 2005–07, only 8% of the 16-year-olds residing in Swiss cantons with
68 endemicity were immunized with at least 3 doses of TBE vaccine.^{2, 3} Even among
69 individuals reporting tick bites to the Swiss Sentinella system 2008–19, vaccination
70 coverage (without information on the number of doses) was only 16–18% (unpublished
71 data, FOPH). Reluctance to accept TBE immunization was associated with the need of
72 frequent boosters⁴, all of which are not re-imbursed by the Swiss health care system.
73 Serological evaluations conducted in the Swiss canton of Schaffhausen showed that
74 TBE IgG persisted for many years in a majority of the vaccinated subjects^{5, 6}, and the
75 authors concluded on long-lasting immunity.⁴ In 2006 FOPH recommended extending
76 TBE vaccine booster intervals from 3 to 10 years, which is also more cost-effective.⁸
77 Finland is the only country which introduced a similar expansion of the booster interval
78 in 2014.⁹

79 In addition to the prolonged booster interval, FOPH recommended TBE immunization
80 to all adults and children (above the age of 6 years) who temporarily or permanently
81 live in an endemic region. Primary vaccination always consisted of three doses at 0,
82 1–3, and 9–12 (Encepur[®]) or 5–12 (FSME-Imm[®]) months. Subsequent to rapid
83 immunization with Encepur[®] on days 0, 7, 21 a fourth dose at 12–18 months became
84 necessary. While the minimal intervals are essential, there is no evidence for the
85 necessity to completely re-start of basic immunization if the recommended interval has
86 been missed.¹⁰ Since that the 2006 amendment the recommendations were modified
87 twice: In 2016, experts and the FOPH encouraged the population and the medical

88 community to start immunizations already in winter in order to provide protection from
89 TBE in the next tick season, but primary series could still be started anytime. In 2019,
90 vaccination recommendations were geographically extended to the entire country
91 except the cantons of Geneva and Ticino. The second vaccine dose now more
92 precisely was recommended to be scheduled after 1 month, but otherwise the
93 recommendations remained unchanged.¹¹

94 As a result of the 2006 recommendations the annual TBE vaccine sales increased
95 from <140'000 in and before 2005 to more than 600,000 in the 2006–08 period.⁷

96 By 2018, based on a large national survey linked with medical vaccination records,
97 coverage of TBE vaccination had increased to 42% overall and ranged from 14% in
98 the Ticino region (no vaccination recommendation) to 60% for ≥ 1 dose.¹² However, no
99 regular assessment of TBE vaccination coverage has been performed which would
100 allow determining rates of vaccine breakthroughs with reliable denominator data.

101 As a result of the lockdown in spring 2020 Switzerland has experienced a decrease in
102 all notifiable diseases with a single exception: TBE increased by 87.5% as compared
103 to the mean of the same periods 2016–2019¹³, or by 70% when taking into account
104 trend and seasonality.¹⁴ Overall, 2020 became an all-time TBE record year with 457
105 cases.¹⁴ In view of persisting 'pandemic travel patterns' with limited border crossings,
106 but with more in-country excursions, vacations, camping, *etc.* there is continued
107 concern about neglecting TBE prevention while everybody focuses on COVID-19
108 vaccination.

109 The objective of this public health report is to evaluate the available data on the impact
110 of the described change in strategy, based entirely on notification data to ascertain
111 whether it has been associated with an increased rate of vaccine breakthroughs or
112 not, with special attention to older age groups.

113

114 **Methods and definitions**

115 This is a retrospective analysis of surveillance data based upon mandatory reporting of
116 TBE in Switzerland, which was introduced in 1984. As previously described in detail,
117 initial laboratory reports are linked to subsequent clinical information, including
118 immunization status.^{2, 15} This means that all information presented here is based on
119 information provided by clinicians who completed notification forms upon receipt of
120 laboratory report confirming a case of TBE. Essentially this reporting system remained
121 unchanged during the study period. The accuracy of the information provided, e.g. the
122 number, date, or brand of vaccinations cannot be verified by the FOPH.

123 As the case definition was different prior to 1999, we included only cases from 2000
124 onwards. The Swiss case definition of TBE differs from the one recommended by the
125 European Centre of Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) by not only including
126 probable and confirmed cases, but also possible cases.¹⁶ Both case definitions
127 exclude patients who do not meet the clinical criteria.

128 In this study, we define vaccine breakthrough as TBE notification meeting the Swiss
129 case criteria in patients with a history of three or more TBE vaccine doses overall.

130 Neither for vaccine breakthrough nor failure there is a consistent definition.^{17, 18}

131

132 **Results**

133 Overall, there was a trend to an increasing TBE incidence over time (Figure 1) mainly
134 due to unvaccinated patients. This most likely is associated with the expansion of the
135 endemic areas during the study period. Table 1 contains the TBE cases notified to the
136 Swiss FOPH in the 5-year period prior to the revised recommendations (2000–04), a

137 transition period (2005–09) and two 5-year periods during which the prolonged booster
138 intervals were broadly implemented (2010–19).

139 Data completeness regarding vaccination status showed no clear trend and varied
140 between 75.2% (95% confidence interval: 71.5–78.6) for the period 2005–09 and
141 85.3% (82.1–88.0) for the period 2010–14 (Table 1). Among the 193 TBE patients who
142 had ever received at least one TBE vaccine dose, 103 (53.4%) reported a complete
143 basic immunization with three or more doses, and 15 (14.6% of those assumed
144 completely immunized) more than three doses. In 100 of 133 individuals who obtained
145 at least one TBE vaccine dose 2000–2019, the brand of the last dose was FSME-
146 Immun® in 72%, and Encepur® in 28%, broadly reflecting the respective market shares
147 in Switzerland; for the remaining 33 individuals the brand was not reported.

148 The 103 TBE patients with reportedly three or more vaccine doses met our definition
149 of vaccine breakthrough. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of breakthroughs over
150 the 5-year periods showed no clear trend—it varied between 1.3% in 2000–04, 4.7%
151 in 2005–09, 7.4% in 2010–14, and finally 2.0% in 2015–19. While the proportion for
152 the period 2005–09 was significantly higher than for the other three 5-year periods, the
153 other three 95% confidence intervals overlapped.

154 Regarding the timing of the last dose among fully vaccinated cases, during the 2010–
155 19 period in which the 10-year booster strategy was implemented, 23 persons
156 developed TBE within the initial three years after the last dose and 38 in the following
157 seven years. Accordingly, the annual breakthrough rate was 7.7 cases per year (23
158 cases divided by 3 years; 95% C.I.: 5.0–11.7) during the first three years after the last
159 dose, and 5.4 cases per year in the following seven years (33 cases divided by 7
160 years; 95% C.I.: 3.9–7.5). In the entire 2000–19 period there was no gradual increase
161 in vaccine breakthroughs (data not shown).

162 Swiss notification data 2010–19 yielded no evidence for the older population to be at
163 an increased risk if not boosted after 3 years: among those aged <60 years, the
164 breakthrough rate during the initial three years after having obtained the last vaccine
165 dose was 3.7 (1.9–6.7) per year vs. 3.7 (2.5–5.5) per year during the subsequent
166 seven years; and among those aged 60 years or older, the respective breakthrough
167 rates were 4.0 (2.2–7.1) per year vs. 1.7 (1.2–2.5) per year. Similarly, and these data
168 are shown at the bottom of the table, the annual breakthrough rate among those aged
169 ≥50 years was 6.0 (3.7–9.6) in the first three years vs. 2.9 (1.8–4.5) in the subsequent
170 7 years.

171

172 **Discussion**

173 Swiss notification data shows that over the past 20 years, 4.0% of tick-borne
174 encephalitis occurred despite a history of full vaccination coverage, independent of
175 age, gender, and without a significant trend over time. The increasing total number of
176 TBE cases over time is associated with increased transmission and a gradual
177 extension of endemicity in Switzerland; the same has been observed in neighbouring
178 countries, such as e.g. Germany¹⁹ and Italy.^{11, 20} Also the proportion of breakthroughs
179 will increase parallel to vaccination coverage; in a hypothetical population in which all
180 are immunized 100% of the cases will be breakthroughs. The incidence of
181 breakthroughs may be slightly higher as compared to other countries since ‘possible’
182 cases were included. Similarly to an earlier Swiss assessment, the male to female
183 ratio was approximately 2:1¹⁵, while overall European data showed a ratio of 3:2.²¹ In
184 the total TBE population, 27.6% were 60 years or older like the respective proportion
185 presented by the ECDC.

186 Compliance with the completion of the primary TBE immunization series appears to be

187 unsatisfying, as almost half of TBE patients who reported any TBE vaccination did not
188 receive at least three doses. Those in the latter group were insufficiently protected.

189 This is implicitly demonstrated by the fact that according to a recent assessment on
190 TBE vaccination coverage in Switzerland 41.7% had received at least 1 dose, 32.9%
191 at least 3 doses — leaving a substantial proportion with incomplete primary series.¹²

192 The same problem with suboptimal rates of completed vaccination has been noted
193 elsewhere.^{22, 23}

194 Similarly to the data presented here, an earlier Swiss report on the 2005–11 period
195 rated 33 of 1,055 TBE cases (3.1%) as possible vaccine failures, the patients having
196 received the last TBE vaccine dose within the past five years before disease onset.¹⁵

197 Overall, 38 (4.6%) had received a complete primary series with at least three doses
198 and 65 (7.9%) had a history of at least one dose.¹⁵ The variation in breakthrough rates
199 across the four 5-year-periods in the current assessment showed no clear trend over
200 time.

201 If there was a massive problem with the Swiss decision to prolong the booster interval
202 from three to ten years, the annual number of breakthroughs would be low during the
203 first three years after the last dose, and then rise during the subsequent seven years.

204 As shown, annual incidence of breakthroughs were marginally higher (no significant
205 difference) in the first three years after vaccination as compared to the subsequent
206 seven years. Thus, our data provide no evidence that the rate of breakthroughs

207 increases with time as would be expected because of continuously decreasing

208 antibodies. Previous publications and, most recently, a carefully compiled systemic

209 review mainly focused on immunogenicity and protective antibody levels, but the

210 importance of effectiveness was also highlighted.²⁴ The data presented here suggest

211 that protection may not only depend of sero-persistence of antibodies, but that immune

212 memory and 'boostability' by natural infection must be additional decisive factors
213 resulting in field effectiveness persisting over a prolonged period.⁷

214 On the other hand, we observed only 15 cases of TBE among those who had received
215 more than three doses of TBE vaccine (14.6%). We can compare this proportion to
216 9.5% (95% C.I.: 8.5–10.6) of individuals in the Swiss population who received 4 or
217 more doses.¹² While the methods of assessment differ and the numbers are small, this
218 might indicate that a fourth dose of TBE vaccine is relevant as a booster, as it has
219 been recently suggested in relation to both brands of TBE vaccines used in Western
220 countries.^{17, 25, 26} In contrast, in an ECDC assessment, there were 24 TBE vaccine
221 failure patients who had received four vaccine doses as compared to 36 with three
222 shots; the difference is less impressive. This larger survey did not contain details on
223 vaccination status, gender and age.²⁷

224 Although the immune response in younger subjects is better, our results do not
225 suggest that older people are at increased risk of vaccine breakthroughs. Some
226 studies have come to the same conclusion^{18, 28, 29}, while mainly Swedish groups have
227 claimed that this risk was increasing with age.^{17, 30}

228 There are several limitations inherent to our data. Most importantly, the basis for this
229 analysis is notification data only without information on the underlying number of
230 vaccinated individuals, precluding the calculation of actual vaccine failure rates. There
231 is a lack of denominator data on the proportion of the vaccinated population preventing
232 to estimate vaccine effectiveness, particularly we ignore whether the number of
233 subjects immunized 1, 2 or 3 years prior to the breakthrough significantly differed from
234 the number of those who got their last vaccine dose 4, 5, ..., 10 years ago. Although
235 residents can still request a TBE booster dose every 3 or 5 years, anecdotal evidence
236 from travel and vaccination clinics suggests that hardly anybody in Switzerland gets a

237 TBE booster earlier than 9 or 10 years, rather there is concern that some miss the
238 recommended booster date at 10 years. Thus, we assume that the denominators for
239 the individual years do not greatly vary. The number of TBE virus exposure remains
240 elusive, and even the data on the number of tick bites would not be a valid surrogate.
241 Further, although all notified cases were included, and laboratories capable of
242 determining TBE serological assessments are reliable in submitting their reports, we
243 cannot exclude that some cases have been missed for lack of serological assessment.
244 In contrast to an earlier survey, we did not differentiate between confirmed, probable,
245 and possible cases¹⁵, so some of the cases of encephalitis assumed to be caused by
246 the TBE virus might result from a different aetiology.

247 The Swiss FOPH will continue to monitor TBE breakthroughs. Further studies are
248 needed to determine for how many years after the last TBE vaccine dose the risk of
249 vaccine breakthroughs does not increase. Additional data on the need and ideal timing
250 of a fourth and possibly further vaccine doses are also needed. Overall, we must refine
251 our immunological knowledge relating to the interplay between humoral and cellular
252 immune response e.g. with a prospective long-term study.

253

254 **Conclusions**

255 Back in 2006 when the booster intervals for TBE vaccination were officially extended
256 to 10 years, several experts considered that this was going to be an interesting,
257 potentially risky, 'public health experiment'. Our data shows no evidence that the new
258 strategy has resulted in an increased rate of vaccine breakthroughs in any age group.
259 As shown elsewhere⁷ it has resulted in a marked increase in the number of people
260 accepting TBE vaccination—a substantial benefit for public health. Thus, there is no
261 reason to change this 10-year TBE booster strategy in Switzerland. However, in these

262 times of mainly intercontinental travel restrictions and potentially increased exposure
263 to TBE risk associated with intra-national or regional travel, documentation of COVID-
264 19 vaccination often offers an opportunity to review the vaccination certificates and to
265 remind the individuals whenever boosters (or primary vaccination) against TBE,
266 diphtheria/tetanus/pertussis, *etc.*, are indicated. As soon as post-COVID-19 global
267 travel will resume, visitors to endemic areas of Switzerland and elsewhere should be
268 recommended TBE vaccination. TBE is not just a problem for the local population, but
269 occurs in travellers.³¹ According to the latest ECDC report, 1.8% of TBE cases were
270 associated with international travel.³²

271

272 2520 words, MAX 3000

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273 **References**

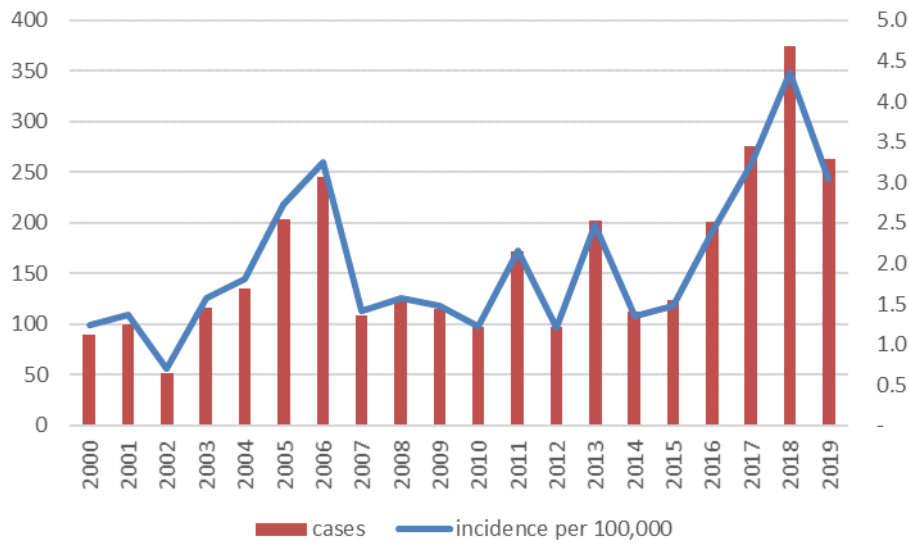
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353 Figure 1: TBE notifications in Switzerland, 2000–2019



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Table 1: Swiss TBE notification data (vaccination status, vaccine doses and time since last dose) across time period (2000–2019), gender, and age group

Period	TBE cases	Known vaccination status		Vaccinated ≥1 dose		Vaccinated ≥3 doses		Last dose ≤3 y*		Last dose >3–10 y*		Last dose >10 y*		Last dose unknown*	
	N	n	% (95%-CI)	n	% (95%-CI)	n	% (95%-CI)	n	% (95%-CI)	n	% (95%-CI)	n	% (95%-CI)	n	% (95%-CI)
2000–04	493	395	80.1 (75.8–83.9)	15	3.8 (2.2–6.3)	5	1.3 (0.5–3.1)	1	0.3 (0.0–1.6)	4	1.0 (0.3–2.8)	0	0.0 (0.0–1.2)	0	0.0 (0.0–1.2)
2005–09	794	597	75.2 (71.5–78.6)	45	7.5 (5.6–10.0)	22	3.7 (2.4–5.6)	15	2.5 (1.5–4.2)	6	1.0 (0.4–2.3)	1	0.2 (0.0–1.1)	0	0.0 (0.0–0.8)
2010–14	680	580	85.3 (82.1–88.0)	64	11.0 (8.7–13.9)	43	7.4 (5.5–9.9)	18	3.1 (1.9–5.0)	23	4.0 (2.6–6.0)	1	0.2 (0.0–1.1)	1	0.2 (0.0–1.1)
2015–19	1238	990	80.0 (77.3–82.5)	69	7.0 (5.5–8.8)	33	3.3 (2.3–4.7)	5	0.5 (0.2–1.2)	15	1.5 (0.9–2.5)	6	0.6 (0.2–1.4)	7	0.7 (0.3–1.5)
Gender															
Male	2063	1653	80.1 (78.1–82.0)	133	8.0 (6.8–9.5)	76	4.6 (3.7–5.8)	33	2.0 (1.4–2.8)	32	1.9 (1.1–2.9)	6	0.4 (0.1–0.8)	5	0.3 (0.1–0.7)
Female	1127	901	79.9 (77.1–82.5)	59	6.5 (5.1–8.4)	27	3.0 (2.0–4.4)	6	0.7 (0.3–1.5)	16	1.8 (1.2–2.7)	2	0.2 (0.0–0.9)	3	0.3 (0.1–1.1)
Missing gender	15	8		1		0		0		0		0		0	
Age group															
<20 years	503	424	84.3 (80.4–87.6)	38	9.0 (6.5–12.2)	17	4.0 (2.4–6.5)	7	1.7 (0.7–3.5)	9	2.1 (1.0–4.1)	0	0.0 (0.0–1.1)	1	0.2 (0.0–1.5)
20–39 years	672	523	77.8 (74.0–81.3)	37	7.1 (5.1–9.7)	14	2.7 (1.5–4.6)	2	0.4 (0.1–1.5)	10	1.9 (1.0–3.6)	2	0.4 (0.1–1.5)	0	0.0 (0.0–0.9)
40–59 years	1147	933	81.3 (78.7–83.8)	63	6.8 (5.3–8.6)	35	3.8 (2.7–5.2)	14	1.5 (0.9–2.6)	16	1.7 (1.0–2.8)	2	0.2 (0.0–0.9)	3	0.3 (0.1–1.0)
60+ years	883	682	77.2 (73.9–80.3)	55	8.1 (6.2–10.4)	37	5.4 (3.9–7.5)	16	2.3 (1.4–3.9)	13	1.9 (1.1–3.3)	4	0.6 (0.2–1.6)	4	0.6 (0.2–1.6)
Total	3205	2562	79.9 (78.3–81.5)	193	7.5 (6.6–8.6)	103	4.0 (3.3–4.9)	39	1.5 (1.1–2.1)	48	1.9 (1.4–2.5)	8	0.3 (0.1–0.6)	8	0.3 (0.1–0.6)
Age group for the period 2010–19															
<50 years	968	801	82.7 (79.9–85.3)	67	8.4 (6.6–10.6)	28	3.5 (2.4–5.1)	5	0.6 (0.2–1.5)	18	2.2 (1.4–3.6)	3	0.4 (0.1–1.2)	2	0.2 (0.0–1.0)
50+ years	950	769	80.9 (78.0–83.6)	66	8.6 (6.7–10.8)	48	6.2 (4.7–8.3)	18	2.3 (1.4–3.7)	20	2.6 (1.6–4.1)	4	0.5 (0.2–1.4)	6	0.8 (0.3–1.8)

*among cases with ≥3 doses