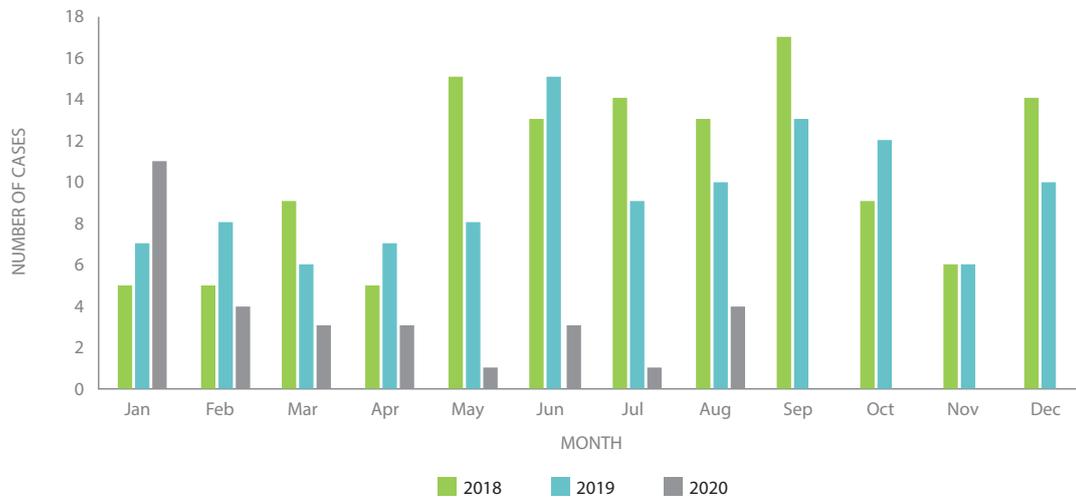


## SEASONAL DISEASES



**Figure 1.** Number of invasive meningococcal disease cases reported to the GERMS-SA surveillance programme by month and year, January 2018 through August 2020, N=266

**Source:** Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis, NICD-NHLS; cherylc@nicd.ac.za

## Alert: malaria transmission risk season

The malaria transmission season in southern Africa traditionally commences around the start of summer and is largely determined by climatic factors. Malaria control measures in South Africa's three endemic provinces (KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, and Limpopo) in the form of indoor residual insecticide spraying, are intended to interrupt transmission by reducing populations of vector mosquitoes, and to detect, report, and investigate malaria cases and clusters. The current COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted important public health programmes, such as tuberculosis and childhood vaccination, by shifting the priorities of healthcare workers and available funds to COVID-19-related activities, and also by discouraging the public from visiting clinics and other healthcare facilities. Restrictions on travelling had the effect of limiting importation of malaria, but these have now been lifted. While the peak of the pandemic appears to have past, it is important not to forget that malaria is another major public health problem. At the community level, malaria control programme activities need to proceed timeously, with necessary COVID-19-related precautions (e.g. small group spraymen training and operations, use of appropriate personal protective equipment, etc). At individual level, members of the

public need to be reminded about the risks of malaria and about preventive actions such as chemoprophylaxis and antimosquito measures, particularly when travelling across the now-open borders to high-risk neighboring countries. Healthcare workers need to remember that there is an overlap between early malaria and COVID-19 clinical presentations, namely that both produce febrile 'flu-like symptoms. The overlap between these infections continues with more serious infections, because severe malaria frequently results in a sepsis-like picture including respiratory distress (ARDS) that can clinically resemble COVID-19 lung involvement. Unrecognised and untreated malaria can rapidly progress to severe illness with a high mortality, and we again remind readers that even non-malaria-endemic provinces (particularly Gauteng) receive imported malaria cases throughout the summer months. Finally, sometimes malaria vector mosquitoes are transported accidentally, and transmit malaria outside their normal habitats to persons with no travel history. While traditionally, influenza was blamed for febrile illness in these 'minibus', 'luggage' or 'taxi-rank' malaria cases, malaria may now be mistakenly diagnosed as COVID-19. A high index of suspicion for malaria is essential to prevent unnecessary illness and deaths.

**Source:** Centre for Emerging Zoonotic and Parasitic Diseases, NICD-NHLS; johnf@nicd.ac.za