



Weekly national influenza report

23 December 2010

Latest figures from the Health Protection Agency (HPA) indicate that levels of seasonal flu are continuing to increase across the UK with both community and hospital data showing a steady upward trend in the numbers of cases.

Vaccine uptake among those in 'at risk' groups continues to remain low in some high risk groups, with 43 per cent of such people under 65 taking up the offer of vaccination. Everyone over the age of 65 is entitled to the vaccine and uptake in this age group is currently 68.5 per cent.

The two main strains of flu circulating are Influenza A H1N1 (2009) 'swine' flu and Influenza B, with H1N1 being the predominant strain. A small proportion of flu cases are resulting in severe disease, particularly in people under the age of 65. This is due to the fact that H1N1 is more likely to infect young people and, unfortunately, a very small number of these may develop severe disease.

In the past week, the HPA has been notified of a further 10 people who have died with confirmed flu, bringing the total number since the flu season began in October this year to 27. 24 of these people died with the H1N1 (2009) strain and three with Influenza B. 18 of those who died were adults and nine were children.

Almost half of those who have died were in a clinical 'at risk' group for vaccination. Vaccination status is known for 22 of these 27 people and only one person received this year's seasonal vaccine.

Currently, 19 people are receiving ECMO (Extra-Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation) treatment in a UK hospital.

Professor John Watson, head of the respiratory diseases department at the HPA, said: "The level of flu activity we are currently seeing is at levels often seen during the winter flu seasons, but due to the fact that H1N1 is one of the predominant strains circulating at the moment, we are seeing more severe illness in people under the age of 65 than we would normally expect.

"Flu can be an extremely serious illness for people in 'at risk' groups, including pregnant women, the elderly and those with other underlying conditions such as heart problems, diabetes, lung, liver or renal diseases and those who have weakened immune systems.

"Flu vaccination offers the best protection from seasonal flu and we continue to urge those in risk groups, including pregnant women at any stage of their pregnancy and healthcare workers, to get vaccinated as soon as possible. The vaccine is safe and effective.

"Most people with flu can 'self care' by taking plenty of rest, drinking lots of fluids and taking over the counter pain relievers such as paracetamol. But anyone displaying severe symptoms, particularly those in vulnerable groups should contact their GP or local out-of-hours service for medical advice.

"The Department of Health has recently confirmed guidance on the use of antiviral drugs for the management of people who are displaying flu symptoms, this includes previously healthy people as well as those in 'at risk' groups. It's hoped wider access to antiviral treatments will help reduce the number of severe cases we are seeing."

Professor Watson continued: "While it is impossible to predict with any certainty the extent to which flu will affect the community each year, recent research conducted by the HPA has suggested that a very substantial wave of activity associated with the pandemic strain is not likely. Nevertheless, activity with H1N1 this winter was expected, particularly in younger age groups, and this, combined with influenza B activity and other winter respiratory viruses has caused a high level of illness at the moment."

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. Throughout the flu season the HPA published weekly figures on flu and flu-like illness on a Thursday afternoon via its weekly flu report. To view the latest report, visit <http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/SeasonalInfluenza/EpidemiologicalData/02influsexpressreport/>
2. The flu H1N1 (2009) virus, formerly known as 'swine flu', is now one of the group of seasonal flu viruses circulating around the world. Following a pandemic, it is often the case that the pandemic strain becomes the most common seasonal strain of influenza the next flu season, so it is not surprising to see H1N1 (2009) circulating this winter.
3. This year's seasonal flu vaccine includes a H1N1 2009 component so that people who are vulnerable are protected against all the circulating strains. For the first time the seasonal vaccine is being offered to pregnant women as they were disproportionately affected by the H1N1 (2009) strain during the pandemic and are more at risk of serious complications.
4. The seasonal flu vaccine is recommended for those aged 65 or over and those with the following conditions, regardless of age: chronic respiratory disease, heart disease, renal disease and chronic liver disease, diabetes requiring insulin or oral hypoglycaemic drugs, immunosuppression. Vaccination is also recommended for pregnant women, those living in long-stay residential care homes, health care workers and carers.
5. Symptoms of seasonal flu include sudden onset of fever, cough as well as sore throat, aching muscles and joints. Antivirals are drugs given to high risk patients who become ill with seasonal influenza. They are most effective if taken within 48 hours of onset and may help limit the impact of some symptoms and reduce the potential for serious complications. They are also used in some situations where it is important to help prevent people from getting influenza.
6. If you are suffering from flu you can use NHS Direct colds and flu symptom checker available at www.nhs.uk/nhsdirect or call 0845 4647. For further information on flu go to: <http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/SeasonalInfluenza/>
7. Maintaining good cough and hand hygiene, such as covering your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough and sneeze, disposing of the tissue as soon as possible and cleaning your hands as soon as you can are important actions that can help prevent the spread of germs and reduce the risk of flu transmission.
8. For media enquiries please contact the national HPA press office at Colindale on 020 8327 7098/6647/6690, out of hours 020 8200 4400 or email cfipressoffice@hpa.org.uk

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