

5th November 2003

Health Protection Agency encourages people to have their flu vaccine

After three unusually quiet years, not unexpectedly the number of flu cases is now rising to what is considered normal seasonal levels, according to the Health Protection Agency's latest figures.

Although at this stage it is far too early to predict whether the numbers will be higher than average this year, the Agency is asking people to be alert to symptoms of flu and is encouraging anyone over the age of 65, or under 65 who falls into an "at risk" group, to ensure they receive their flu vaccination.

Dr John Watson, a respiratory expert at the HPA said: "For the last three years, we have seen very low levels of flu in the UK but flu activity has started earlier than normal this year so we are expecting to see more cases.

"Laboratory testing so far this year shows that the main strain circulating is a flu A (H3N2) Fujian-like strain. This is slightly different to the A (H3N2) Panama-like virus, which has been circulating in the UK in recent years. The current flu vaccine contains the Panama-like virus and is considered to offer some protection against the Fujian-like strain and good protection against other strains that may also circulate.

"Children and adolescents have been particularly affected and there have unfortunately been a few deaths due to flu reported in children in England over recent months. HPA laboratory testing has shown that two of these cases resulted from infection with the Fujian-like strain. Over the winter period we usually see around three deaths in children from respiratory illness in England each week.

"When flu strains change over time, they are more likely to affect the young who will have less immunity to them. For this reason it is especially important for children over six months of age, who fall into the at-risk groups, to be vaccinated."

The Department of Health has written to all doctors to make them aware of the current situation and remind them of the vaccination and treatment guidance.

Notes to Editors:

1. The Royal College of General Practitioners monitors the number of people per 100,000 who are consulting their GP for flu or flu-like illness throughout the winter. Similar schemes are conducted in Scotland, Wales and NI. The HPA also collects information on flu activity from hospital laboratories, NHS Direct and the ONS.
2. The latest flu report showed that 36.7 per 100,000 people had consulted their GP with flu or flu-like illness in the week of 4th November. (the regional rates are as follows: North 47.1; Central 42.3; South 23.1). This is normal for the time of year.

3. There have also been three flu deaths in children in Scotland over the last two months. For further details on the situation in Scotland please contact the Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health press office on 0141 201 4443.
4. If you are suffering from flu you can get advice from NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk. For further information on flu go to: http://www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/influenza/flu.htm
5. Since the last major flu season in 1998/99, testing for flu has become much more sensitive which means that we can now confirm flu in patients where it may not have been previously possible.
6. The current flu vaccine for this season includes: an A/New Caledonia/20/99 (H1N1)-like virus; an A/Moscow/10/99 (H3N2)-like virus (the widely used vaccine strain is A/Panama/2007/99); a B/Hong Kong/330/2001 – a B Victoria-like virus
7. Flu vaccine is recommended for those with a chronic heart or chest complaint, including severe asthma, people with chronic kidney disease, diabetes, or with lowered immunity due to any disease or treatment such as steroid medication or cancer treatment. All those living in residential homes where infection once introduced would spread rapidly.
8. The Department of Health have now advised GPs to consider prescribing antiviral drugs where necessary in line with guidance issued from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) in September. To see the current guidance please go to: www.nice.org.uk