

PUBLIC URGED TO TAKE PRECAUTIONS AS FLU SEASON BEGINS EARLY

NSW Health is warning that the influenza season has started early and is well underway in many areas, particularly in Sydney. So now is the time to get vaccinated and to be doubly careful with hygiene to prevent spreading flu to others.

The advice from NSW Health is to:

- Turn away from others and cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze
- Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- Stay at home if you have the flu to avoid infecting others.

If you think you may have influenza and you need to see a doctor call first so the clinic can take precautions to reduce the risk to other people. Director of the Centre for Health Protection, Dr Jeremy McAnulty said “we are already seeing high rates of flu activity in hospital Emergency Departments, especially in people over the age of 65.”

“The main strain of influenza currently circulating is influenza (H3N2) and it has largely replaced the pandemic H1N1 flu strain that emerged in 2009 as the dominant virus strain.”

NSW Health is urging people, especially pregnant women, parents of young children and the elderly, to get vaccinated against the flu. Each year the influenza vaccine contains three different strains of influenza. The 2012 vaccine contains 2 strains that protect against the influenza A strains called “H1N1 California” and “H3N2 Perth” and 1 strain that protects against the influenza B strain called “Brisbane” said Dr McAnulty.

“So far in NSW this season we have mainly seen 2 strains of influenza circulating: the influenza A “H3N2 Victoria” strain, and to a lesser degree the influenza B “Brisbane” strain.”

“The vaccine is well matched against the B strain of influenza, but is not identical to the H3N2 strain circulating in the community. Experts advise that the vaccine will provide significant protection against this new influenza strain so it’s well worthwhile getting vaccinated.”

Free flu vaccine is still available to people at greater risk of complications from influenza, including all people aged 65 years and older, pregnant women, people with chronic illness, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and older.

“People who don’t get vaccinated not only place themselves at risk of the flu and developing potentially serious illness but also put others at risk of infection” said Dr McAnulty.

Health advice and information is available via the free Health Direct Australia service, staffed by registered nurses 24-hours a day, on 1800 022 222.

For a range of health information, go online to www.health.nsw.gov.au