

1 August 2014

Public urged to help protect the elderly as flu season takes off

NSW Health is warning the elderly to be on high alert for influenza with it hitting a number of aged care facilities hard across the State in recent weeks, particularly in Sydney and Newcastle.

Dr Vicky Sheppeard, Director of the Communicable Diseases Branch at NSW Health said during July, 24 aged care facilities have reported influenza outbreaks.

“These outbreaks have affected 61 staff and 318 residents, 45 of which have been hospitalised”, Dr Sheppeard said.

“Almost 2,800 cases of confirmed influenza were notified in July and we are also seeing high rates of flu activity in hospital Emergency Departments, especially in people over the age of 65.

“While we are currently experiencing some milder winter weather, don’t be complacent about influenza.

“It’s not too late to be vaccinated against the flu. This is especially important for pregnant women and the elderly.

“Each year the influenza vaccine contains three different strains of influenza.

“The 2014 vaccine contains two strains that protect against the influenza A strains called *H1N1* and *H3N2* and one strain that protects against the influenza B strain.

“So far this winter we have seen all three strains of influenza circulating but the influenza A *H3N2* strain has been the dominant one. We know people in older age groups are more susceptible to this strain in particular.

“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.”

Dr Sheppeard said NSW Health is asking people to be doubly careful with hygiene to prevent spreading flu to others.

The advice from NSW Health is to:

Defer visits to friends and relatives in aged care facilities and hospitals if you have cold or flu symptoms. Stay at home to avoid infecting others until you are well.

Catch it! Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.

Bin it! Dispose of used tissues straight away.

Kill it! Wash your hands regularly, especially after you cough, sneeze or blow your nose.

“If you think you may have influenza and you need to see a doctor ask for a mask to wear in the waiting room, and frequently use hand rub to avoid spreading germs to others.” Dr Vicky Sheppeard said.

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