

Influenza Update – Southern Hemisphere Winter 2010

Influenza : The Disease

Influenza is a highly contagious respiratory viral illness that sometimes causes serious complications such as pneumonia. The initial symptoms include fever and cough often with a sore throat and runny nose.

In the southern hemisphere, most activity occurs from April through September. In the northern hemisphere, the flu season generally ranges from November through March. Risk of exposure exists throughout the year in tropical areas.

Although most people will recover spontaneously within a few days, influenza can be life-threatening, especially in the very young and the elderly. Influenza is a viral illness and anti-viral medication may be used in some patients, particularly those more prone to the serious complications. There is however a substantial amount of resistance to anti-viral medication. Influenza infection will not respond to antibiotics, but antibiotics are sometimes used if your doctor suspects a concurrent or secondary bacterial infection.

Influenza vaccination is an effective way to reduce your risk of getting the illness. It is especially important for those individuals who are at higher risk of developing complications of the illness. (Please see below for further details)

Current Situation (April 2010)

The WHO report of 26 March 2010 indicates that pandemic Influenza A (H1N1) 2009 activity continues to be variable throughout the world, with sporadic activity in many countries and localized outbreaks in some countries. Influenza B activity remains high in China, Hong Kong, Iran & Mongolia.

IMC doctors will closely monitor results of ongoing surveillance efforts in Singapore and the rest of the world, and follow the guidelines of the Ministry of Health in relation to any course of action deemed prudent. Should any additional information become available, we will share that with our patients on a timely basis.

You may also refer to the Singapore Ministry of Health website (<http://www.moh.gov.sg/mohcorp/default.aspx>) for updates on the situation in Singapore, or the WHO webpage (<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/influenza/update/en/index.html>) for updates on the global situation.

Health Advisory

The vaccine for the 2010 Southern hemisphere flu season is now available. The current vaccine is a trivalent vaccine and provides protection for the pandemic Influenza A (H1N1) 2009, Influenza A (H3N2) and Influenza B. Although the seasonal influenza vaccination may not match the circulating strains exactly, adults and children at risk who have not had an annual flu vaccination should consider having one. Protection is effective about 2 weeks after you receive the vaccine. Vaccination for the Northern hemisphere flu season generally begins in September and may continue to January, and beyond, as influenza activity sometimes peaks in January or later. Vaccination for the Southern hemisphere flu season generally begins in April- May.

The following groups are thought to be at higher risk of developing complications of influenza and should be vaccinated (based on Singapore Health Ministry recommendations):

- Persons aged 65 years and older;
- Persons with chronic heart and lung diseases (including asthma);
- Persons with chronic metabolic disease (including diabetes mellitus), kidney or blood disorders, or lowered immunity caused by medications (eg steroids) or HIV (human immunodeficiency virus);
- Children or teenagers (6 months to 18 years) receiving long-term aspirin therapy
- Women in the 2nd or 3rd trimester of pregnancy.

Others for whom vaccination is strongly encouraged:

- Travelers (over the age of 6 months) to temperate zones during the influenza season
- Persons aged 50 or over

- Household contacts & caregivers of:
 - children aged < 5 years
 - adults over 50 years
 - children/adults belonging to high risk groups (above)
- Any adult wishing to reduce the risk of falling ill with influenza (including anyone planning pregnancy in the next year), or of transmitting it to others.

The US ACIP (Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices) expanded its recommendations in Feb 2010 - universal annual influenza vaccination is now recommended.

Please refer to IMC's patient education leaflet on "Flu Vaccine" for further information on the vaccination.

In addition, the following measures should be taken to prevent flu and prevent spreading illness:

- Maintain good hygiene practices – i.e. wash hands thoroughly and frequently, use a serving spoon when sharing food, cover mouth and nose with tissue when coughing or sneezing, wearing a mask if unwell;
- Avoid crowded places with poor ventilation
- Stay at home if one is unwell
- Those with flu-like symptoms (especially those returning from recent travel to places with increased influenza activity e.g. Hong Kong) are advised to seek help promptly.
- Parents should take their young children with fever or influenza-like symptoms for prompt medical attention.

Please see your IMC doctor if your need further advice.

Updated: April 2010