‘It’s coming back…’

Experts warn that reduced vaccination may lead to increased health risks this flu season

EMBARGOED: 05:00am: Wednesday 30 March 2011: As the ‘flu season’ begins, new findings released today by the Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) have revealed that every third person that you come into contact with on transport, at work or while buying a coffee this season could be the one that passes the influenza virus on to you or someone you know.

The survey of 1,120 people\(^i\) revealed that while 82 percent of respondents recognise that even healthy people would benefit from vaccination, nearly three quarters (72%) are unsure whether they will get the vaccination, almost half (42%) have never had the vaccination and around 5,400,000\(^ii\) adult Australians (35%) will definitely not be seeking vaccination this year.

Although people recognise the benefits of vaccination there was some reluctance identified through the survey. While people understand that being vaccinated in the past does not necessarily protect them from future influenza outbreaks (95%) they still do not believe it is important to be vaccinated every year (28%).

The worrying aspect for these people is that many people are avoiding vaccination and potentially becoming a risk to themselves and those around them because they see vaccination as ‘too much hassle’ (40%), or unnecessary because they ‘never get the flu - so there’s no point’ (18%).

Professor Bill Rawlinson, virologist and Director of the Influenza Specialist Group (ISG), suggests that although we see more complications from influenza in people with underlying conditions, such as the elderly, diabetes, and other chronic lung and heart diseases, complications can still occur in otherwise healthy people. Events in the Northern Hemisphere
provide some idea of the impact this year’s flu season can have in Australia.

The latest surveillance data reveals 54,096 cases of influenza reported across Europe so far. While in England and Ireland, at the peak of the influenza season, more than one in every 100,000 people was hospitalised in intensive care units, in a single day.

The H1N1 influenza virus, which is still circulating, has also caused serious illness, hospitalisation and deaths across the Northern Hemisphere in otherwise healthy, younger adults, many of whom did not have underlying risk factors.

“People need to be aware that influenza is not the common cold and that taking preventive measures, along with avoiding transmission to others, is very important. We should be concerned for our own health, as well as for those friends, work colleagues or family members around us; in particular those with underlying conditions who are at increased risk of serious outcomes, such as pregnant women”, said Prof Rawlinson.

“The impact of influenza is quite unpredictable. However, it is with us every year and outbreaks in Australia will soon be imminent. The reports of influenza-related hospitalisations and deaths in Europe should act as a sign that precautions should be taken”.

The Influenza Specialist Group is today launching a new digital video to show Australians how influenza is transmitted across the world. The aim is to demonstrate that while last year’s influenza season may have been forgotten, the virus has not gone – it’s coming back and preventive measures should be taken.

The video forms part of a new range of online educational resources also launched today, including; consumer information brochures and posters available in GP surgeries, and a YouTube channel featuring video information on the virus and advice on prevention and treatment.
Vaccination remains the single most effective way of protecting yourself against the infection and is particularly important for older Australians, as well as the 2.2 million younger Australians* vi currently also eligible for free influenza vaccine under recent changes to the Commonwealth Government scheme.

The Australian Immunisation Handbook also recommends influenza vaccination for any person 6 months of age or over who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza. vii

According to Dr Alan Hampson, OAM, Chair of the Influenza Specialist Group (ISG), people who are at-risk, and those wishing to protect themselves and those around them, should ask their GP about a vaccination now.

“There are on average over 2,200 hospital admissions each year in Australia where influenza is the proven or suspected primary cause of hospitalisation; and over 1,750 of these cases are in people aged under 65 years, so it is not just the elderly that are at risk,” said Dr Hampson.

“These statistics and the findings of this new survey reinforce that now is a good time to speak with your GP about influenza vaccination, particularly as many people are currently eligible for a free seasonal influenza vaccine, including pregnant women”.

“The seasonal influenza vaccine helps protect you against the three virus strains which have been identified by the WHO as potentially leading to serious illness in the Southern Hemisphere this winter. This includes A/H1N1 ‘swine flu’ which is just one of the viruses that we are likely to face,” said Dr Hampson.

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**Notes to the editor:**

The ISG is a not for profit organisation whose mission is to reduce the impact of influenza in Australia through educational programs and public awareness activities. It consists of medical and scientific specialists from around Australia and New Zealand with an interest in influenza. The ISG is Chaired by Dr Alan Hampson, former Deputy Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza. The ISG receives funding from industry; however, the ISG, through its Board, maintains full control over all of its activities and published materials.

Annual influenza vaccination is strongly recommended for those who are predisposed to severe complications. This includes those aged 65 years and over, people living with an underlying medical condition, pregnant women and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over and the vaccine is available free in doctors surgeries for these groups. Underlying medical conditions include heart disease, chronic lung disease (incl. severe asthma), diabetes, chronic kidney failure, neuromuscular disorders and people who have weakened immune defences.

Influenza infections typically start to increase in June, peaking between July and September, but in some years do occur earlier. As it takes two weeks for full immunity to develop after vaccination, now is the time to get vaccinated against influenza.

Basic personal hygiene, such as coughing and sneezing etiquette, is also essential to preventing the spread of influenza. In addition, there are antiviral medications available on prescription for those who fall ill with influenza. These medications can help limit the effect of influenza if they are taken within the first two days of the onset of symptoms.

*Calculated by estimating the number of Australians <65 years who meet the new National Immunisation Program criteria, including: ATSI (2,97,143), cardiac disease (cyanotic congenital heart disease, coronary heart disease, congestive heart disease – 360,360), diagnosed COPD (758,880), severe asthma (35,000), diagnosed diabetes mellitus (525,950), chronic renal failure (129,494), HIV infection (26,836), malignant cancer (220,100), chronic neurological conditions (262,200) and pregnancy (292,021). Data was then weighted to remove double/triple counting using AIHW data (excl. pregnancy).
Attitudes to Influenza Transmission & Vaccination in Australia. Influenza Specialist Group (ISG). March 2011. Online omnibus conducted by McCrindle Research for ISG.

Figure calculated based on latest ABS population data. 23 March 2011.


Influenza Specialist Group. Data on file. 2010


ABS 2006 Census Population and Housing.


ABS National Health Survey Summary of Results 4364.0. 2007-2008


ABS National Health Survey Summary of Results 4364.0. 2007-2008

ABS National Health Survey Summary of Results 4364.0. 2007-2008

ABS, Births, Australia, 2008.