

Media release
June 25th 2015

Beat the flu and have a flu shot now! While influenza cases are on the rise, it is not too late to get vaccinated.

As the number of influenza cases start to rise and amid indications that Australia is facing another particularly severe flu season, a new ISG survey shows that many Australians remain unprotected because of the late availability of vaccine this year and difficulty in arranging vaccination. The latest ISG survey shows that 1 in 5 people who had intended to get a flu shot this year are currently still unprotected. 33% of them stated they could either not get a suitable GP appointment or the vaccine was not available at their GP.

To the end of May there have been 9132 laboratory-confirmed cases, which represents a 47% increase of influenza cases compared with the same period last year and the highest number of recorded cases for that period since the current form of recording began in 2001.

Dr Alan Hampson, Chair of the Influenza Specialist Group urges people who cannot afford to get the flu because of health or other reasons to get a flu shot now: "The high early numbers may well be suggestive of a severe season to follow. With the peak of the influenza season usually expected between July and September there is still a short window for most people wanting protection to be vaccinated. However, because immunity from vaccination takes 1-2 weeks to be effective this should be done as soon as possible!

MEDIA OPPORTUNITY

Australia's 2015 flu season

**BACKGROUND BRIEFING – Thursday 25 June 2015 at 10:30 am AEST
Online/ Dial in**

The briefing will discuss the following issues:

- Current strains of flu circulating in Australia and worldwide
- Current infection rates and infection forecasts in Australia
- Influenza vaccines available this season and what protection they offer

- Clinical implications of this flu season: hospital treatments, overwhelmed emergency departments and ambulance ramping
- Tips on how to avoid the flu

SPEAKERS:

- **Dr Alan Hampson** *Chair of the Australian Influenza Specialist Group*
- **Dr Rod Pearce** *is a GP and Deputy Chair of the Australian Influenza Specialist Group*
- **Professor Mary-Louise McLaws** *is from the Hospital Infection and Epidemiology Surveillance Unit within the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at the University of New South Wales (UNSW)*

DATE: THU 25 JUNE 2015

START TIME: 10:30 am AEST

DURATION: Approx. 45 min

VENUE: Online

Log in details for the briefing:

<https://www.scimex.org/newsfeed/aussmc-briefing-australias-2015-flu-season>

OTHER MEDIA RESOURCES:

Website Influenza Specialist Group: <http://www.isg.org.au/>
Surveillance Data (Flu numbers): <http://www.isg.org.au/index.php/influenza-activity-surveillance/>

Publications (Guide for GPs, nurses etc.):
<http://www.isg.org.au/index.php/isg-publications/>

ISG Consumer Website: <http://www.flusmart.org.au/>
Flu test (Should I have the flu shot?, Do I have the flu? How to treat flu):
<http://www.flusmart.org.au/flutest/>

VIDEO: What is the flu? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n9L1-qJ36s>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/InfluenzaSpecialistGroup?ref=hl>
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/fluspecialist>

And a media- website with animated infographics etc.: <http://www.flushotnow.org/>

MEDIA CONTACTS

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Background Information

Who is most at risk of getting infected with influenza?

Everybody is at risk of infection but infants and young children often suffer the highest rate of infection. The impact in terms of hospital admissions is often greatest in infants and older adults whereas deaths mostly occur in older adults. People of any age with underlying risk conditions (chronic heart, respiratory, kidney problems, diabetes and pregnant women) are also at risk of severe outcomes if infected, as are most indigenous Australians, and are eligible for free vaccine. Smokers and people who are obese are also at risk but don't qualify for free vaccine.

What can people do to prevent themselves getting influenza?

- Be vaccinated – vaccination, although not 100% effective is the single most effective way of protecting yourself against the flu.
- Hand hygiene is also important - avoid touching your mouth and eyes or eating food from your hands particularly if you haven't washed or disinfected them with an effective hand rub.
- Where possible, avoid crowds during the flu season.
- Infectious influenza virus can survive in the air for many minutes after a cough or sneeze and on hard surfaces contaminated with respiratory secretions for several hours.

Facts:

This year, to the end of May there had been 9132 laboratory confirmed cases of influenza in Australia, a 47% increase on the same time last year, which had the previous highest number of cases.

Laboratory-confirmed cases represent a small percentage of all cases, probably between 2-4%

Influenza A(H3N2) and influenza B are responsible for most of the cases this year, the former has highest infection rates in adults while the latter is more likely to infect children.

The vaccine is well matched to the great majority of strains seen to date.

Studies indicate that in an average year, in Australia, influenza is responsible for:

1500-3,500 deaths
18,000 hospitalisations
300,000 doctor consultations
1.5 million lost work days.

About influenza

Influenza, commonly known as 'the flu', is a highly contagious illness. The virus is transmitted easily by the respiratory route from person-to-person via droplets and small particles produced when infected people cough or sneeze, and through hand to mouth or eye via contact with contaminated surfaces. Influenza is characterised by a sudden high fever, cough (usually dry), headache, muscle and joint pain, feeling unwell, and sore throat. Each year, influenza causes more than 13,500 hospitalisations and 300,000 GP consultations in Australia and costs the Australian healthcare system \$85 million. Research shows healthy working adults vaccinated against influenza have nearly half the number of doctor's visits and sick days due to upper respiratory illness, compared to those who were unvaccinated.

About the ISG

The Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) is a professional not-for-profit advocacy group comprising medical and scientific specialists from Australia and New Zealand with an interest in influenza. The ISG works with key Australian professional and consumer groups, and with Australian Federal, State and Territory departments of Health in their educational activities regarding influenza and its prevention. Dr Alan Hampson, ISG Chair, is former Deputy Director of the Australian World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza.