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Experts warn that influenza outbreaks will soon hit Australia

Influenza outbreaks in New Zealand signal that influenza is imminent – at a time when many hospital services are already stretched to the limit

29 June 2006: The Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) today warned that influenza will soon hit Australian shores, following the commencement of influenza outbreaks in New Zealand. With Australian outbreaks considered imminent, experts warn that people at risk of severe consequences from influenza should move to protect themselves against this highly contagious disease.

“Vaccination is the primary means of protection against influenza, and it is not too late to get vaccinated against this season’s influenza strains,” said Mr Alan Hampson, Convenor of the ISG and Expert Advisor to the WHO. “Furthermore, greater use of antiviral medications for people who do fall ill with influenza can minimise both complications and the spread of the disease in the community.”

As Australia’s influenza season tends to follow that of New Zealand, medical specialists are expecting to begin seeing more widespread incidences of the disease over the next 1-2 weeks, and some sporadic cases have already been recorded. This follows a cool start to the winter season in Australia, with colder than average temperatures in many states throughout May and early June¹, leading to a spike in hospital admissions due to respiratory illness.

“In Australia more people die during the winter months when influenza and other respiratory infections are more common, but many vulnerable people are still not protecting themselves against this serious disease,” said Mr Hampson.

The most recent survey conducted by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing showed that only 42% of Australians under 65 with underlying conditions are getting vaccinated against influenza², while use of antiviral medications among those who do become ill is even lower.

“If you have an underlying condition such as heart disease, asthma or other lung disease, diabetes, kidney problems or a weakened immune system, influenza can not only make you severely ill, but can even be life-threatening,” added Mr Hampson.

Influenza is characterised by a sudden onset of debilitating symptoms including fever, body aches, fatigue, cough and headache³. Vaccination is recommended for people aged 65 or over and people of all ages who have an underlying condition which puts them at risk of severe consequences from influenza⁴, as well as anyone else over the age of 6 months who wants to avoid the disease. These same groups are expected to benefit from antiviral medication if they do become ill with influenza.

“While access to antiviral medication has been limited in the past, the ISG understands that these availability issues have been remedied and antiviral medications are now available on prescription for the treatment of seasonal influenza,” Mr Hampson explained. “The ISG has also just launched its own set of guidelines helping doctors and patients make informed decisions about using antiviral medications.”

Antiviral medications, when used within 48 hours of symptom onset, have been shown to reduce both the illness duration and the cost of influenza among working adults⁵, highlighting the place of antiviral therapy within influenza-management.

“With up to 20% of Australians becoming infected with influenza in a severe year, vaccination and antiviral medications are easy and effective in helping reduce unnecessary suffering and economic hardship caused by influenza and its ensuing complications,” Dr Rod Pearce, a SA GP and member of the ISG Executive said.

“It takes up to two weeks for full immunity to develop once you have been vaccinated, so anyone who does not want to be ill with influenza this season should talk to their GP now about vaccination,” Dr Pearce added.

“Additionally, if you think that you are getting influenza and wish to reduce the time and severity of your illness, it is important that you see a GP immediately, as treatment with antiviral medication must be started within 48 hours of a person becoming ill, preferably within 24 hours,” Dr Pearce concluded.

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Note to the editor:

- The ISG discussion paper on the treatment of influenza in interpandemic periods will be available online at: <http://www.influenzacentre.org/> (please refer to the ‘Reports’ page) from 30 June 2006.

References:

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4. NHMRC. The Australian Immunisation Handbook 8th Edition: 2003
5. Rothberg, MB., Rose, DN. Vaccination Versus Treatment of Influenza in Adults: a Cost-Effectiveness Analysis. *The American Journal of Medicine* 2005;118:68-77