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Influenza has hit Australia – further outbreaks imminent, experts warn

Australians urged to get protected following recent research highlighting the serious nature of influenza

5 July 2007: Today the Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) urged Australians to protect themselves and those around them against influenza – a highly contagious and potentially life threatening disease. This advice follows influenza outbreaks in New Zealand, cases in all capital cities in Australia, and outbreaks expected here over the coming weeks.

International research has further emphasised the serious nature of influenza, with a recent study highlighting the association between influenza epidemics and an increase in death rates from cardiovascular events. The study reported a 30% increase in deaths from heart attacks during the influenza season.¹

“This research reinforces what we have been saying for years,” said Dr Alan Hampson, Chair of the ISG and Expert Advisor to the WHO. “Influenza is a serious and potentially fatal disease, especially for those at high risk of complications – not just from heart disease, but from other chronic conditions such as asthma or other lung disease, diabetes, kidney problems or weakened immune system.”

Hence the ISG is encouraging people at risk of complications from influenza, and anyone else who does not want to become ill with the disease, to do the following:

If you are not experiencing any influenza symptoms:

- Get vaccinated (if you have not already had the vaccine this season).
- Take appropriate measures to protect yourself against infection, such as regular hand washing and avoiding touching your mouth or face.

If you are experiencing influenza symptoms:

- If you see your GP within 48 hours of symptom onset there are treatments available which can limit the effect of influenza and its complications if they are taken early.
- Rest at home to avoid stressing your body and to avoid infecting other people.
- Make sure you observe basic hygienic measures including regular hand washing and covering your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze.

“Vaccination should always be the primary means of preventing influenza; however, if you do get ill with the disease, antiviral medications are an easy and effective way to help reduce unnecessary suffering,” Prof Bill Rawlinson, Medical Virologist, Prince of Wales Hospital in NSW and ISG Board

member said. "Taking preventative actions such as getting vaccinated and observing basic hygienic measures are vital as influenza is a highly contagious disease. The virus can survive up to an hour in the air and up to eight hours on hard surfaces after an infected person coughs or sneezes."

The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends influenza vaccination for people of all ages who have an underlying condition which puts them at risk of severe consequences of influenza, as well as everyone 65 years or over.² Approximately 1.2 million Australians under 65 suffer from one or more chronic condition making them vulnerable to serious complications from influenza;³ yet despite this well under half of them get vaccinated against the disease annually.⁴

Influenza is usually characterised by a sudden onset of debilitating symptoms including fever, body aches, fatigue, cough and headache.⁵

"It is estimated that up to 20% of Australians can become infected with influenza in a severe year," Prof Rawlinson said. "Thus it is important that we all take particular care to help protect ourselves and those around us against influenza this winter – particularly for people with underlying medical conditions and for those caring for these people in hospital and community settings."

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Note to the editor:

The ISG is a not for profit organization 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. Dr Hampson was instrumental in the formation and development of the ISG and now continues in a consultancy role with the Australian Government the National Influenza Pandemic Action Committee (NIPAC) and the World Health Organization. Dr Hampson is a Consultant Virologist, and consults through Interflu Pty Ltd. The ISG receives funding from industry; however, the ISG, through its Board, maintains full control over all of its activities and published materials.

References:

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