

Friday May 30, 2008

Flu warning for Queensland - vaccinate now

Queenslanders have been urged to avoid being among the 80,000 Australians predicted to seek medical attention for flu this winter.

Queensland Health's Senior Director of Communicable Diseases Branch, Dr Christine Selvey said that with less than two days until the start of winter, Queensland Health is urging those people most at risk of flu to get vaccinated now.

People over 65 years of age, adults and children with underlying medical conditions like diabetes, heart and kidney conditions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 50 are most at risk of developing serious complications from flu.

"These members of our community are our most vulnerable and we need to make sure they are well looked after," Dr Selvey said.

"Vaccination is the best protection against this disease and is strongly recommended for high risk groups.

"Yet the latest figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that while many older Queenslanders are being vaccinated against influenza, uptake of the vaccine among other high risk groups remains low.

"More than 75 percent of Queenslanders aged 65 years and older were vaccinated against influenza, while only 45 percent of Queensland adults aged 18-64 years with chronic conditions were vaccinated.

"These figures are a real concern and I'm asking anyone at risk to get vaccinated now. If you have a family member at risk, please encourage them to be vaccinated and you should also be vaccinated yourself," she said.

Dr Selvey said anyone wanting to be vaccinated needed to act now as the vaccine can take up to two weeks to start working.

“It is also important to be vaccinated each year, as the strain of the virus changes regularly,” she said.

The vaccine is provided free under the National Immunisation Program to anyone aged 65 and over, and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 or older, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15-49 who have risk factors.

Dr Selvey said last year’s serious flu outbreak demonstrated just how important vaccination and simple precautions like good hygiene are in minimising the impact of influenza on the community.

She said people often overlooked the fact that the spread of influenza can be managed if people take simple precautions such as:

- washing your hands often
- covering your coughs and sneezes
- wiping down common surfaces such as door handles and phones
- avoiding crowded public places when they are sick.

Dr Selvey said that more than 4,500 cases of influenza were reported in Queensland last year – double the amount reported in 2006.

“Last year was a particularly bad year for flu and it really is too early to predict what type of flu season we will experience this year.

“That is why it is so important for people to take precautions and look at their hygiene habits as this really does have an impact,” Dr Selvey said.

More tips on how to stay healthy this winter can be found at www.health.qld.gov.au

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