

## State health officials say flu season rivals 2009, other severe seasons

Written by Minnesota Department of Health  
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New data released by the Minnesota Department of Health today clearly shows that the state is experiencing a very severe flu season, with significant numbers of cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

Although the numbers of hospitalizations reported rivals the 2009 pandemic, there is no evidence of a new influenza virus circulating and state health officials stressed that the profile of the disease outbreak is very much in keeping with other very severe seasonal influenza years.

To date, Minnesota hospitals have reported 1,121 hospitalizations due to influenza-like illness. For the week ending Jan. 5 alone, there were 401 hospitalizations, similar to a peak week in the 2009-10 pandemic. MDH has confirmed a total so far of 27 deaths due to influenza or influenza-related complications. In addition, there were 28 outbreaks in long-term care facilities over the past week.

"We are clearly at a high level of influenza activity in the state," said Minnesota Health Commissioner Dr. Edward Ehlinger. "But it's important to keep this year in perspective: What is occurring has happened before. This is what influenza looks like, this is what it can do. That's why we stress every year the importance of prevention measures, such as getting a flu shot, covering your cough, washing your hands and staying home if you are ill. We never know at the beginning of a flu season what it's going to look like."

The demographics of Minnesota's hospitalized cases and deaths are what we expect with seasonal influenza, said Commissioner Ehlinger. "Of the 1,121 hospitalized persons, 62 percent of the cases are over 65 years of age and 15 percent are under 25 years of age. This is in contrast to the 2009 pandemic when 12 percent of hospitalizations were in individuals 65 and older and 61 percent were in those under age 25 years. Twenty-three of the 27 influenza deaths this year are in people 65 years and older. Because so many of the serious cases are occurring in long-term care residents, Ehlinger stressed that it's very important for long-term care facilities to make sure that all their staff are vaccinated against influenza to help prevent the spread of flu to vulnerable residents. Also, MDH has advised facilities to follow CDC guidelines to limit transmission of the virus, such as restricting visitors, particularly anyone who is ill.

The rapid increase in influenza cases is creating significant challenges for health care partners around the state, Ehlinger said. However, those areas hardest hit with flu are implementing at least portions of their plans developed for pandemic influenza. Hospitals, clinics and long-term-care facilities within each region are working together to coordinate use of resources such as beds, supplies, and medicines.

MDH has been engaged in regular consultations with the regional health care coalitions, keeping health care providers and local public health staff abreast of developments in the situation and any changes in guidance through routine health alerts and advisories.

"The current influenza situation clearly demonstrates the importance of having a strong public health system in place," Ehlinger said. "We have tapped into our response system and, while we are being challenged, it appears to be working well."

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It's important for all Minnesota residents to do what they can to protect themselves from influenza and limit the spread of the disease. If you haven't yet been vaccinated, get vaccinated for influenza. It's not too late. Influenza vaccination is now recommended for everyone six months and older unless they cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons. It is especially important that those at high risk for serious complications from influenza be vaccinated. These include pregnant women, seniors, young children and those with chronic medical conditions.

Children under six months of age cannot receive influenza vaccine, so household contacts and caretakers should be vaccinated to protect the very young. Older people and those with medical conditions may not respond as well to the vaccine as others and household contacts and caretakers of these individuals should also be vaccinated.

During flu season, besides getting vaccinated, there are other steps people can take to avoid spreading or catching influenza:

Do your best to stay healthy. Get plenty of rest, physical activity and healthy eating.

Stay home from school or work if you have a respiratory infection. Avoid exposing yourself to others who are sick with flu-like illness.

Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue whenever you cough or sneeze, then throw the tissue away. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve.

Clean surfaces you touch frequently, such as doorknobs, water faucets, refrigerator handles and telephones.

Wash your hands often with soap and water or with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available.

The symptoms of influenza, which tend to come on suddenly, can include a sore throat, coughing, fever, headache, muscle aches and fatigue. People who become severely ill or those at risk for severe disease with influenza, who have influenza-like symptoms contact their healthcare provider promptly. Influenza is caused by a virus and antibiotics are not effective against it, although antivirals such as oseltamivir and zanamivir are effective, especially if given shortly after the development of symptoms.