

Influenza in 2010

In light of the continuing Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu) pandemic around the world, steps are being taken this year to ensure that everyone in New Zealand is given access to vaccines that will protect them against pandemic influenza as well as seasonal influenza strains. It is expected that pandemic influenza H1N1) will again be the main influenza strain that circulates in the country this year.

Influenza is different from the common cold and includes the following symptoms:

- A fever greater or equal to 38°C
- At least one respiratory symptom such as a cough, sore throat or nasal symptoms such as a runny nose
- At least one systemic symptom such as a headache, aches/pains, sweats/chills/feeling feverish or fatigue.

Influenza can cause serious complications such as pneumonia and every year New Zealanders die as a result of this infection.

There are many reasons to get immunised and to do it early.

Influenza pandemics happen when a new influenza virus strain develops and spreads around the world. People who have not been exposed to a new virus are more likely to catch it.

Influenza pandemics can vary greatly making it impossible to accurately predict the eventual impact of a pandemic. The 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide, started with relatively mild waves of illness and then evolved into the most severe influenza pandemic in history.

Every year we see a peak of influenza in winter. The timing of a peak this year is less certain because there is a global pandemic of a new influenza virus, Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu). Pandemic waves can happen at any time, and it is very likely that we will see another wave. This may begin earlier than usual, possibly in early autumn.

Immunisation will reduce your chance of catching and spreading influenza in the community. It will also help keep you and those around you safe. The seasonal influenza vaccine this year covers Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu) as well as seasonal strains.

The Ministry of Health encourages everyone in New Zealand to get immunised against influenza, and because of the risk of an early wave this year, to be immunised early.

The influenza vaccine is offered free to certain groups of people at higher risk of developing severe complications.

Don't let the flu get you.

How did Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu) affect New Zealand?

New Zealand was among the first countries in the world to experience what became pandemic influenza, with our first cases being detected in late April 2009. The World Health Organization officially declared the pandemic in June 2009.

During last year's pandemic wave, New Zealand saw significant pressure on hospital services, especially during the peak of the disease. This was particularly the case for intensive care units.

Though pandemic influenza infections generally caused a mild disease, some people were severely affected. There were more than 3200 people confirmed with Pandemic Influenza H1N1 (swine flu) infection in New Zealand last year, with at least 20 of those cases resulting in death.

The groups that were found to be most severely affected by the pandemic were infants under one year of age, Pacific and Maori people, pregnant women and those with other pre-existing conditions such as heart and lung diseases.

It is expected that Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu) will again be the dominant strain of influenza in the community in 2010. Although the timing of a wave of infection in 2010 is uncertain, experience in the northern hemisphere suggests that it may start as early as mid-March and peak in April.

That is why we are offering early immunisation to groups at higher risk of severe infection and to frontline healthcare workers, in addition to the annual seasonal influenza vaccination programme.

Who is at higher risk of complications from Pandemic Influenza H1N1 2009 (swine flu)?

The following groups have been identified to be at higher risk of developing complications if they were to get pandemic influenza.

People who:

- are pregnant
- are morbidly obese
- have cardiovascular disease (ischemic heart disease, congestive heart failure, rheumatic heart disease, congenital heart disease and cerebrovascular disease)
- have chronic respiratory disease (asthma if on regular preventive therapy; other chronic respiratory disease with impaired lung function)
- have diabetes
- have chronic renal disease
- have any cancer, excluding basal and squamous skin cancers if not invasive
- have other conditions (autoimmune disease, immune suppression, HIV, transplant recipients, neuromuscular and central nervous system disease, haemaglobinopathies, children on long term aspirin).

Young children, especially Maori and Pacific children, have been identified to be at higher risk of developing complications.

Where to go for more information

Speak to your doctor or practice nurse about getting vaccinated or phone the immunisation advice line 0800 IMMUNE (466863).