

Single-Week Flu Cases Increase Again, DPH Reports Additional Flu Deaths, Including First in Kent County

DOVER – Single week numbers of laboratory-confirmed flu cases increased again in Delaware. The Division of Public Health (DPH) reports that there were 1,268 lab-confirmed flu cases recorded between February 4 to February 10. This brings the season's total to 4,235. Last season's final figures of 4,590, were the highest number of seasonal cases since record keeping began in 2004.

Additionally, DPH is announcing eight flu-related deaths; six of them occurred in the last week, and two occurred earlier in the season but were just recently reported. Influenza-related deaths are a reportable condition in Delaware. The most recent deaths bring the season's total number of flu-related fatalities to 18. All of the six individuals who passed away last week were from New Castle County. The individuals ranged from age 44 to 89 years old, and none had gotten a flu vaccine this year. All but one had underlying health conditions. Of the two deaths that occurred previously, both victims were from Kent County. One, a 66-year old male died in January, and the second, a 71-year old female, died earlier in February. Both had multiple underlying health conditions and neither had been vaccinated.

“This is a terribly difficult flu season, as evidenced not only by the sheer number of flu-cases but also the growing number of flu-related deaths, said DPH Director Dr. Karyl Rattay. “While people may feel helpless and believe there is

nothing they can do to make this situation better, every one of us has an active role to play. There are specific things each of us can do to prevent further spread of everyday germs, and in particular, the influenza virus.”

If you are sick, do not go to school or work until you are fever-free for 24 hours without fever-reducing medication. Call your primary care provider, or visit a walk-in center if you don't have one, as soon as symptoms develop, as they may choose to prescribe antivirals for treatment, without an office visit. Wash your hands frequently – and wipe down frequently touched surfaces with soap and water or disinfecting products. Cough or sneeze into tissues or into your inner elbow, if tissues are not available.

People who are extremely ill with symptoms such as trouble breathing, bluish skin color, fever with a rash, dizziness or severe or persistent vomiting should seek immediate medical help. While there are signs that flu activity may be declining along the West Coast, overall, influenza-like-illness increased again nationally, and we will likely continue to see elevated flu activity for weeks to come. This is the highest level of influenza-like illness recorded since the 2009 H1N1 pandemic.

DPH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continue to encourage anyone who has not yet gotten the flu vaccine to get one. The vaccine is still the best way to prevent flu illness, serious flu complications, and the spread of the flu in the community by offering greater protection to the overall population. Even with current vaccine effectiveness estimates, vaccination will still prevent influenza illness, including thousands of hospitalizations and deaths.

While some individual medical providers are reporting a shortage of the flu vaccine, this is not widespread. Residents are urged to first contact their primary care provider for a

shot, or to visit <https://vaccinefinder.org>. Children ages 9 and older can get their flu shot at local pharmacies. Additionally, Delawareans can visit flu.delaware.gov/ or call DPH at 1-800-282-8672 for a list of Public Health Clinics within State Service Centers that are providing the vaccine. DPH is increasing opportunities to provide the flu vaccine. The DPH clinics at the Porter and Hudson State Service Centers are now making vaccines available on a walk-in basis instead of by appointment. DPH clinics in Kent and Sussex are also making the vaccine available to clients during WIC or reproductive health visits in addition to accommodating those who make appointments for vaccination at Milford State Service Center, Shipley State Service Center in Seaford, and Williams State Service Center in Dover.

Medical providers and pharmacies who may be having an issue with their vaccine supply should check the influenza vaccine tracking availability system (IVATS) available at: <https://www.izsummitpartners.org/ivats/>.

The CDC released the results of early vaccine effectiveness studies for the 2017-18 season on Thursday Feb. 15, 2018. Overall vaccine effectiveness was 36 percent. That means a vaccinated person's risk of having to go to the doctor because of flu was reduced by more than one-third. Effectiveness was 25 percent against A strain – H3N2, 67 percent against A strain – H1N1 and 42 percent against influenza B viruses. These findings are similar to what has been observed in the past. Of note, vaccine effectiveness was much higher in children 6 months through 8 years of age: overall VE against influenza A and B viruses was 59 percent, and it was 51 percent effective specifically against H3N2. This means the risk for A(H3N2) illness that required a doctor's visit was reduced by more than half among this group of vaccinated children. The interim estimate of 25 percent vaccine effectiveness against A (H3N2) viruses this season indicates that vaccination provided some protection, greater than what

was reported in Canada (17 percent) and Australia (10 percent).

The greatest proportion of cases in week six is again in the 5-24 year age group (38.6 percent) followed by ages 0-4 (20.2 percent). The smallest percentage of cases again is in the 50-64 age group (9.9 percent). For the entire season to date, 32.2 percent of cases are in the 5-24 year age group, 19.0 percent of cases are ages 65 and older and 16.9 percent are in the 0-4 year age group. To date, persons age 65 and older comprise 61.7 percent of the hospitalizations. This mirrors the national trend and the CDC is recommending the pneumonia vaccine for those 65 and older as a result.

Flu is difficult to predict. It's not possible to say in advance precisely when the 2017-2018 flu season will peak or end, or how severe it will be. For more information about flu surveillance in Delaware, read the weekly flu report at dhss.delaware.gov/dph/epi/influenzawkly.html.

A person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf-blind or speech-disabled can call the DPH phone number above by using TTY services. Dial 7-1-1 or 800-232-5460 to type your conversation to a relay operator, who reads your conversation to a hearing person at DPH. The relay operator types the hearing person's spoken words back to the TTY user. To learn more about TTY availability in Delaware, visit <http://delawarerelay.com>.

Delaware Health and Social Services is committed to improving the quality of the lives of Delaware's citizens by promoting health and well-being, fostering self-sufficiency, and protecting vulnerable populations. DPH, a division of DHSS, urges Delawareans to make healthier choices with the 5-2-1 Almost None campaign: eat 5 or more fruits and vegetables each day, have no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time each day (includes TV, computer, gaming), get 1 or more hours of physical activity each day, and drink almost no sugary beverages.