



News Release

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Busy flu season on the way

HEIDELBERG, Germany – While the peak of the flu season hasn't hit Europe yet, signs from the U.S. indicate it could be one of the worst in recent years.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention tracks influenza activity year-round and publishes a report weekly on Fridays. According to this surveillance, the proportion of people seeing their health care provider for influenza-like-illness (ILI) in the United States has been elevated for four consecutive weeks, climbing sharply from 2.8 percent to 5.6 percent during that time. Last season, which was relatively mild, ILI peaked at 2.2 percent.

“While we can't say for certain how severe this season will be, we can say that a lot of people are getting sick with influenza and we are getting reports of severe illness and hospitalizations,” said Dr. Joe Bresee, who is Chief of the Epidemiology and Prevention Branch in the CDC's Influenza Division.

Influenza is rampant across the United States with 41 states reporting widespread flu activity and several have declared public health emergencies. With the busiest part of the season – typically February and March – still ahead, Europe Regional Medical Command officials expect to see cases of influenza ramping up here in the near future.

The geographic spread of influenza activity in Europe was reported as widespread in five countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Norway and the United Kingdom) and nine countries reporting increasing trends, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

The H3N2, or Type A, flu strain that is prevalent this year tends to be more severe than others, medical officials said. Children, older people and pregnant women are especially susceptible to the disease, ERMC Force Health Protection officials said.

Proper hand washing and covering your coughs and sneezes are also effective in helping prevent the spread of influenza, but the flu vaccine is the best way to prevent the disease or, if a person does catch it, to help minimize the effects, officials explained. This year's vaccine is effective against Type A, Type B and Swine Flu variants of the disease.

Full protection against the flu takes about two weeks after receiving the vaccine, so people should get it as soon as possible. Eligible beneficiaries should contact their local military treatment facility or host nation health care provider to receive the vaccine.