

Dear Reader

The potential for a flu epidemic this year in the UK

Influenza (flu) is a common infection that is seen all the year round by peaks during the winter months.

Flu is not the same as the “common cold”. Flu symptoms include a high fever (38c or above), tiredness and weakness, general aches and pains, a headache and a dry chesty cough. Common cold symptoms such as a runny nose, sore throat and sneezing can be caused by flu but tend to be less severe than the flu like symptoms.

Flu is normally a self limiting illness but can be serious and every year there are a number of deaths that are caused by flu. In 1918 there was a flu pandemic, the “Spanish flu” that year killed over 50 million people worldwide and over 220,000 people in the UK. More people died in 1918 of flu than were killed in the whole of World War 1. Pandemic flu occurs every few years and in the last 100 years includes Asia flu (1957/8), Hong Kong flu (1968/9) and the last pandemic occurred in 2009 but fortunately was a mild strain and its impact was less than predicted yet still killed close to 300,000 people worldwide.

Why is all this important to your readers?

Australia is just coming out of its winter and has seen a significant increase in the number of patients with flu – over 200,000 cases and more than 100 deaths. The impact of flu on Australia is an accurate indicator of what we might expect during our winter.

It is therefore predicted that the UK will see a significant increase in the number of cases of flu this winter and this will come on top of a health service that is already under considerable strain. The impact is not just felt by hospitals but is seen by the GPs in your practice.

What can you do to protect yourself?

The flu vaccination is an important measure to help protect individuals and provide some immunity to the predicted strain of flu that is expected to be prevalent during that winter.

Those most at risk include people:

- Aged 65 or more
- Pregnant women
- People with chronic lung disease including asthma, chronic obstructive lung disease (COPD), emphysema and chronic bronchitis
- Diabetes
- Chronic heart disease
- Chronic kidney disease

- Neurological diseases such as Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis
- People who have had their spleen removed
- Carers
- People who are healthcare workers.

It is therefore important that everyone in the at risk group considers having a flu vaccination, and if not vaccinated this winter contact your practice and arrange to have this done as soon as possible. The vaccination is free to all those people who fall into the at risk groups.

For those who fall outside the at risk groups you can still be vaccinated and this is available through your local pharmacist and although you will have to pay for this the small cost balanced against the risk of flu is worth it.