

PRESS RELEASE

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Cases of flu increasing in Wales

Health officials are urging people to do all they can to protect themselves and stop the spread of flu as recent figures show cases of the illness are rising in Wales.

Visits to GPs, hospital admissions and admissions to intensive care units of confirmed cases of influenza (flu) have all increased across Wales in the last few weeks.

Accident and Emergency departments across many parts of Wales are already dealing with existing winter pressures and flu will inevitably add to this burden.

The most recent figures (as of first week of January 2016) show that 51 patients have been confirmed to have flu since October 2015, when the first case was diagnosed, and nine of these cases have been admitted to intensive care units in Wales.

Not everyone who has symptoms of flu will be tested, which means that the actual number of people who have had flu is likely to be a lot higher.

Over 2,400 people have also visited their GP with flu like symptoms in Wales already this winter. All age-groups have been affected, although young children, the elderly and adults with chronic conditions are particularly vulnerable.

Public Health Wales is urging those in 'at risk' groups that it's not too late to get their free flu vaccine to protect themselves against the illness, and for all those with symptoms to take measures to prevent the spread of flu.

Dr Richard Roberts, Head of the Vaccine Preventable Disease Programme at Public Health Wales, said, "Recent figures suggest that flu is now circulating across Wales. Although those in risk groups should have been vaccinated by now, it's not too late to get vaccinated.

"Most viruses being detected are influenza A (H1N1) viruses and the flu vaccine offered this season is a good match, so is expected to provide good levels of protection. From recent experience, we would expect that the flu virus will be circulating in Wales for six to eight weeks, or even longer, so it is important to ensure that remaining eligible people are vaccinated as quickly as possible."

Influenza B viruses are also being detected, which usually affect younger people and children more than older adults.

Dr Roberts added; "It's important for those in a risk group developing symptoms of flu to seek early advice on treatment. Anyone affected should also try to reduce the risk of spreading flu. But it's not too late to get the vaccine. For vulnerable patients who haven't yet been vaccinated it will still give them good protection for the rest of this season."

Unlike the common cold which may develop over several days, flu symptoms usually develop very rapidly with a high temperature and often include a headache, aching muscles, extreme tiredness and cough.

Those in 'at risk' groups who think they have flu are advised to contact their GP or NHS Direct Wales (0845 46 47) for advice as soon as the symptoms start as medication may be recommended.

Those at high risk of complications from flu can be offered anti-viral drugs which may reduce the risk of serious complications if started within two days of the first symptoms.

Healthcare and social care workers with direct patient contact, carers and people most at risk of the complications of flu are recommended to have a flu vaccination. This includes everyone aged 65 and over, people with certain long term health conditions and pregnant women.

Children aged two and three on 31 August 2015, as well as children in reception class, year 1 and 2 in primary school, have been offered the nasal spray flu vaccine. In most areas the school vaccinations are now complete, but two and three year olds can still obtain the nasal spray flu vaccine from their GP surgery.

Flu immunisation is available from GPs and some community pharmacies in Wales and is free on the NHS for those most at risk.

The public are also being reminded to take the proper precautions to help reduce the chances of flu spreading.

Anyone experiencing flu-like symptoms is encouraged to follow three simple steps to prevent the illness from spreading: Catch it. Bin it. Kill it.

- **'Catch it'** – always cough or sneeze into a tissue
- **'Bin it'** - dispose of the tissue after use
- **'Kill it'** - then wash your hands or use hand sanitizer to kill any flu viruses

Dr Roberts said; "Once flu is circulating widely, apart from vaccination, following 'catch it, bin it, kill it' and staying away from others while you are ill are the best methods that can help prevent spread.

"Always use a tissue to catch sneezes, throw away used tissues where germs can linger and always kill germs by washing your hands with soap and water, or

cleaning them with a sanitising gel. If you have children, you should help them to follow this advice.

“In a household where there is a case of flu, you should clean hard surfaces such as door handles and worktops regularly, using a normal household cleaning product.”

Anyone with symptoms of flu should drink plenty of fluids, take ibuprofen or paracetamol to relieve symptoms, and avoid contact with vulnerable individuals while they have symptoms, which usually resolve in about a week.

Flu is a respiratory illness caused by a virus that affects the lungs and airways.

The flu virus spreads easily via droplets which are sprayed into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Direct contact with contaminated hands or surfaces can also spread infection.

Any individual that feels unwell with flu-like symptoms can get advice on treatment from the NHS Direct Wales website at www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk or the helpline on 0845 46 47.

For more information please visit www.publichealthwales.org or www.beatflu.org

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Editor's notes:

Beat Flu

Beat Flu is an annual campaign, run by Public Health Wales, which promotes the free NHS flu vaccination to those in 'at risk' groups in Wales and other eligible groups such as carers, and health/social care workers.

Most eligible people should visit their GP surgery to get vaccinated, but some local pharmacies also offer the service. Eligible groups include:

- People aged 65 or over
- People aged 6 months and over with chronic medical conditions including heart or chest problems (including asthma that requires regular steroid inhalers or tablets), kidney or liver disease, diabetes, neurological conditions, stroke (or mini stroke), or spleen problems)
- People with lowered immunity due to either a medical condition or taking medication such as steroids or cancer treatment
- Pregnant women
- People living in a nursing or residential home
- Carers of an older or disabled person, or of someone whose health would be at risk if the carer got flu
- Carers who work on a voluntary basis providing frequent care to one or more vulnerable people whose welfare would be at risk if the individual became ill.
- People working in voluntary organisations providing planned first aid such as St John's Ambulance

- Community first responders
- Children aged two and three years on 31st August 2015,
- and children in reception class, year 1 and year 2 in primary school, ***these school age children will have received their vaccine in school***

Health and social care workers with direct patient/client contact are also recommended to have an annual flu vaccination, which should be provided by their employer.

More information on the campaign can be found at www.beatflu.org or www.curwchfliw.org. Beat Flu is also on twitter and facebook: @beatflu @curwchfliw www.facebook.com/beatflu www.facebook.com/Curwch-ffliw