

PRESS INFORMATION

Europe's winter flu season starts

Utrecht, the Netherlands and Stockholm, Sweden, January 24, 2008: The 'flu' has arrived in Europe, according to the European Influenza Surveillance Scheme (EISS) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The two organisations confirm an upsurge in the number of laboratory confirmed cases of influenza in several European countries.

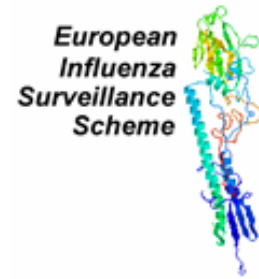
As of this week, 13 European countries are reporting significant influenza activity (Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland and the UK).ⁱ This increase in influenza activity, which can be expected at this time of the year, is likely to spread to other European countries in the near future. If the virus behaves as it has in previous years then it will gradually move eastwards and northwards during the coming weeks.ⁱⁱ

ECDC estimates that seasonal influenza is responsible for between 40,000 and 220,000 excess deaths in Europe each year, depending upon the severity of the influenza season.ⁱⁱⁱ So far, this year's seasonal influenza has been predominantly caused by a new strain of the A(H1) influenza virus which is usually associated with mild epidemics.^{iv} In the last 15 years, H1 infection rates have been highest in young children but so far this winter, influenza has shown high infection rates in the working population in four countries (Ireland, Spain, Switzerland and UK). Following a World Health Organization recommendation in February last year, this new strain replaced the old H1 strain in this season's flu vaccine to provide more optimal protection.

EISS chairman, Professor Koos van der Velden, explained that *"Usually over 70% of doctor consultations for influenza are for children up to 14 years. However this year healthcare services should be gearing up to an increase in demand for doctor consultations, not only from concerned parents, but also from people of working age."*

ECDC is supporting the work of EISS to monitor influenza cases across Europe, improve knowledge of how the disease spreads and so strengthen Europe's defences against it. Zsuzsanna Jakab, Director of ECDC, pointed out that the greatest burden is still likely to be felt by the elderly and chronically ill: *"Influenza is a disease that needs to be taken seriously. It is unpleasant for anyone who catches it, and can be fatal for older people and people with chronic conditions such as heart or lung disease. People in these high risk groups should protect themselves by getting vaccinated."*

Now that influenza has arrived it is important that people take steps to reduce the spread of influenza.



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- Where possible, people infected with influenza should avoid close contact with others
- Basic hygiene measures such as hand-washing are also effective in reducing the spread of influenza
- People in high risk groups (older people, people with chronic conditions such as heart disease or lung disease, immune compromised people) should get vaccinated against influenza, if they have not already done so
- Other measures include antiviral medications, which can be used according to national protocols to prevent infection or reduce the severity and duration of symptoms

EISS produces a weekly seasonal influenza bulletin reporting laboratory-confirmed cases from the EISS monitoring service. It coordinates the collection of data from 27,500 physicians and 38 national reference laboratories to provide real time reporting of the incidence of influenza in Europe, and information on the strain and type of virus. This week's bulletin is showing low levels of influenza activity in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania and Sweden.

The surveillance bulletin can be accessed at the EISS website: www.EISS.org. Information about influenza in Europe can also be accessed at the ECDC website (www.ecdc.europa.eu), including ECDC's weekly influenza web-update: http://ecdc.europa.eu/Health_topics/influenza/news

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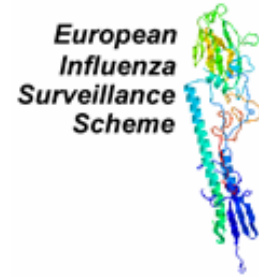
Notes to editors

About EISS

- EISS works in close collaboration with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).
- ECDC's mission is to identify, assess and communicate current and emerging threats to human health posed by infectious diseases and it performs its role by pooling Europe's health knowledge, to provide authoritative opinion about the risks posed by current and emerging infectious diseases.

About Influenza

- Influenza, commonly called the 'flu', is a highly contagious viral illness caused by influenza A and B viruses.
- It is characterised by a sudden symptom onset with patients experiencing a severe cough, headaches, muscle aches and pains, fever/chills and fatigue/weakness.^v
- Each year influenza affects, on average, between 5% and 15% of the population.^v
- Influenza can occur as a pandemic, usually every 10-50 years in which a new strain of the influenza A virus causes simultaneous deaths worldwide.^v



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- During an influenza outbreak primary care physician consultations are estimated to increase by 150% to 450%.^{vi,vii}
- Influenza causes a significant amount of absence from work during the influenza season.^{viii}

ⁱ European Influenza Surveillance Scheme. The influenza season has started in a number of European countries. EISS Weekly Electronic Bulletin 2008; 18 January 2008: 249. Available at <http://www.eiss.org>. Accessed 21 January 2008.

ⁱⁱ Paget J. et al. Influenza activity in Europe during eight seasons (1999-2007): an evaluation of the indicators used to measure activity and an assessment of the timing, length and course of peak activity (spread) across Europe. *BMC Infectious Diseases* 2007, 7:141doi. Available at <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2334/7/141/abstract>. Accessed 18 January 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Seasonal Human Influenza and Vaccination - Fact sheet. Available at http://ecdc.europa.eu/pdf/071203_seasonal_influenza_vaccination.pdf. Accessed 15 January 2008.

^{iv} Simonsen L, et al. Impact of influenza vaccination on seasonal mortality in the US elderly population. *Arch Intern Med*. 2005;165:265-72

^v World Health Organization. Outbreak Communication: WHO Handbook for Journalists: Influenza Pandemic. Updated December 2005. Available at http://www.who.int/csr/don/Handbook_influenza_pandemic_dec05.pdf. Accessed 13 December 2007

^{vi} Fleming DM. The impact of three influenza epidemics on primary care in England and Wales. *Pharmacoeconomics* 1996;9 Suppl 3:73-4

^{vii} Barker WH. Impact of epidemic type A influenza in a defined adult population. *Am J Epidemiol* 1980 Dec;112(6):798-811

^{viii} Keech M. The impact of influenza and influenza-like virus on productivity and healthcare resource utilization in a working population. *Occup Med* 1998;48:85-90

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