

Health Matters- Wellness Out West

WOW

Winter blues, flu's and other vaccines

It is that time of the year again, the season for influenza (often incorrectly called the Asian flu), chest infections and mild depressions from the long nights, cold days and congested motorways. It is perhaps a time to think about taking good care of ourselves and those close to us, pep up the natural vitamins with fruit and green veggies and prepare our body defences.

Influenza vaccine is available in all general practices, and free for the over 65 and those with any chronic condition, **until the end of June**. Make sure, if you have not already, and especially if you have asthma, diabetes, or any chest or heart condition, that you ring the practice nurse and book in for a flu vac. The virus changes every year (mutates) and thus the vaccine has to reflect this and last year's vaccine will not work for this years flu.

This year it is the Brisbane strain that is coming and this is a **very nasty one** – please do not blame the Austrians' for this, the name comes from the laboratory that first found it!

“New Zealand may be in for a higher rate of influenza in the 2009 season than we have seen in the last three years, according to current indicators. Last year our closest neighbours in South Australia had the highest rates of influenza in five years. A potentially deadly influenza strain, known as the Brisbane H3N2 strain, killed six children in four Australian states in 2008, with most of the cases coming from Queensland. The “Brisbane strain” is the talk of Europe this winter and medical authorities have warned it could be the most deadly influenza virus they have seen for 20 years”.

Anna-Marie Frost: chair of the National Influenza Strategy Group (NISG)

Vaccine strains for 2009

- * A(H1N1): an A/ Brisbane/59/2007 (H1N1)-like strain (15µg HA per dose)
- * A(H3N2): an A/Brisbane/10/2007 (H3N2)-like strain (15µg HA per dose)
- * B: a B/Florida/4/2006-like strain (15µg HA per dose)

Why is flu vaccination in the population important?

Influenza hospitalizes a number of people every year in NZ, usually by setting off pneumonia (infection in the lungs) and occasionally heart failure (from inflammation of the heart) or encephalitis (brain inflammation). Usually people with chronic conditions, older people or those with poor immune systems suffer these complications, but these medical disasters can occur in healthy young people. Influenza is thus more than a

profound cold and besides lasting longer and making one more miserable, it has this serious side.

Who is most likely to catch the flu?

As school children tend to infect each other more than adults, they hold the “reservoir” of virus during an epidemic and bring the infection home to parents and other children. Sitting next to a sneezing, spluttering person on a bus, plane or train is another good way to catch the flu. Similarly teachers, doctors and nurses. If you are unfortunate to be the sufferer, please “sneeze or cough nicely”, into you elbow or a handkerchief to restrict the spread of the thousands of viral particles released! Did I myself have a flu jab; yes there is no escape from the ‘on-to-it’ nurses at my medical centre!

There are other vaccinations to consider, besides the childhood vaccines, there is pneumococcal vaccine. This is not funded by government but gives protection lasting for 5 years. It is not too expensive, and protects from pneumonia due to the bug, pneumococcus and protection. Those at risk, or who have had pneumonia before, are advised to seek this protection, or at least discuss it with your practice nurse or GP.

Be wise, immunise!

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