

Flu season still getting worse; now as bad as 2009 swine flu

BY MIKE STOBBE
AP MEDICAL WRITER

NEW YORK (AP) — The flu has further tightened its grip on the U.S. This season is now as bad as the swine flu epidemic nine years ago.

A government report out Friday shows 1 of every 13 visits to the doctor last week was for fever, cough and other symptoms of the flu. That ties the highest level seen in the U.S. during swine flu in 2009.

And it surpasses every winter flu season since 2003, when the government changed the way it measures flu.

"I wish that there were better news this week, but almost everything we're looking at is bad news," said Dr. Anne Schuchat, acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Flu season usually takes off in late December and peaks around February. This season started early and was widespread in many states by December. Early last month, it hit what seemed like peak levels — but then continued to surge.

The season has been driven by a nasty type of flu that tends to put more people in the hospital and cause more deaths than other more common flu bugs. Still, its long-lasting intensity has surprised experts, who are still sorting out why it's been so bad. One possibility is that the vaccine is doing an unusually poor job; U.S. data on effectiveness is expected next week.

Some doctors say this is the worst flu season they've seen in decades. Some patients are saying that, too.

Veda Albertson, a 70-year-old retiree in Tampa, was sick for three weeks with high fever and fluid in her lungs. She said she hadn't

been this sick from the flu since the 1960s, when she was a young mother who couldn't get out of bed to go to the crib of her crying baby.

"It was like 'Wham!' It was bad. It was awful," she said of the illness that hit her on Christmas Day.

Heather Jossi, a 40-year-old Denver police officer and avid runner, said her illness last month was the worst flu she's experienced.

"I don't remember aches this bad. Not for four days," said Jossi. "It took me out."

Albertson said she got a flu shot, Jossi did not.

Last week, 43 states had high patient traffic for the flu, up from 42, the CDC reported. Flu remained widespread in every state except Hawaii and Oregon and hospitalizations continued to climb.

"It's beginning to feel like a marathon," said Dr. Anthony Marchetti, emergency department medical director at Upson Regional Medical Center, a 115-bed hospital in rural Georgia. A quarter of the hospital's emergency department visits are patients with flu, and the hospital has added nursing staff and placed beds in halls to accommodate the increase, he said.

"It just means we have to keep on keeping on. We're getting used to it," Marchetti said.

So far, it has not been a remarkably bad year for flu deaths. Flu and flu-related pneumonia deaths have lagged a little behind some recent bad seasons. The CDC counts flu deaths in children and there have been 63 so far. They have gone as high as about 170 in a season. Overall, there are estimated to be as many as 56,000 deaths linked to the flu during a bad year.

But reports of deaths —

some in otherwise healthy children and young adults — have caused growing fear and concern, health officials acknowledge.

On Friday, Delisah Revell brought her 10-month-old daughter to the Upson Regional emergency room. "I heard how bad it is and I didn't want to take any chances," said Revell, who drove 30 minutes to get to the hospital in Thomaston.

The CDC said the amount of suspected flu cases at doctor's offices and hospital emergency rooms last week matched that seen in 2009, when a new swine flu pandemic swept the world. Swine flu, also called pandemic H1N1, was a new strain that hadn't been seen before. It first hit that spring, at the tail end of the winter season, but doctor visits hit their height in late October during a second wave. This flu season, hospitalization rates have surpassed the nasty season of the winter of 2014-2015, when the vaccine was a poor match to the main bug.

Health officials have said this year's vaccine targets the flu viruses that are currently making people sick, including the swine flu virus that has become a regular winter threat. However, preliminary studies out of Australia and Canada have found the shot was only 10 to 20 percent effective in those countries against the H3N2 strain that's causing the most suffering this winter.

Doctors say they're a bit bewildered as to why this season is so intense.

"It is surprising," said Dr. James Steinberg, chief medical officer at Emory University Hospital Midtown in Atlanta. "It's not a hugely new strain. So why is it so severe? I don't think we know."

MEDICATION SAFETY



COURTESY PHOTO | KRISTINA MILLER/SHERIDAN VAHCS

Rob Wilson, left, and Taler Steir, pharmacy residents with the Sheridan Veterans Affairs Health Care System, look at medications in the VA's pharmacy. Patients should maintain a personal medication list to help advocate for themselves and provide adequate information to all members of their health care team.

Why keep an accurate medication list?

As we age, it is common to see the number of medications increase. That's why it can be easy to lose track of the medications prescribed, especially when you have more than one medical provider. However, it's important for each patient to advocate for themselves and provide adequate information to all members of the health care team.

One way of doing this is providing an accurate medication list that includes all prescriptions and non-prescription medications including herbals, vitamins, creams, ointments, eye drops and inhalers. Without an accurate and updated medication list, patients are at increased risk for the following medication-related problems:

Problem 1: Drug interactions.
A drug interaction occurs when the medication you are currently taking mixes with other substances (medications, food, alcohol, etc.) resulting in a side effect or an unexpected symptom. One effective way to avoid medication interactions is to verify safety with your pharmacist. You should always check with your pharmacist before starting or stopping any medications, including over-the-counter medications or supplements. Some drug interactions can put you at increased risk of falls, bleeds or result in confusion. This risk is decreased when you are able to provide an updated medication list to your health care providers.

Problem 2: "Too many cooks in the kitchen."

Most patients have multiple health care providers managing their conditions. In order for the entire team to provide the best care, all players need to understand the whole picture about the patient. Typically, when patients discharge from hospitals or visit with

specialty care providers, a medication change is made. It is essential to share information between providers to increase communication and optimize care.

Problem 3: High-risk medications.
Some medications require closer monitoring to increase the safety of patients. Additionally, these same medications may have a higher risk of side effects. It is important that all members of the health care team are aware of high-risk medications you are taking to avoid negative outcomes. Examples of high-risk medications include insulin, blood thinners or medications that require frequent blood work. It is critical that high-risk medications are updated and accurate on your medication list.

Patients should always have a medication list on hand to prevent the potential problems discussed above. A proper medication list includes a few simple pieces of information. For each medication taken, the list should include medication name, dosage strength and how often the medication is taken. It is also important for pharmacists and health care providers to know any over-the-counter medications or supplements you take, since these can interact with other medications. The list should also contain any medication allergies, including your specific reaction to the medication.

This medication list should be with you at all times. Patients can store a paper copy of this medication list in their wallet or store a list on their phone. This will allow providers, pharmacist, nurses and other members of the health care team to optimize treatment.

TALER STEIR AND ROB WILSON are pharmacy residents with the Sheridan Veterans Affairs Health Care System.

KHN's 'What The Health?' There's a really big health bill in that budget deal

KAISER HEALTH NEWS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The bipartisan budget deal that passed Congress this week includes enough health policy changes to keep reporters and analysts busy for months.

In addition to renewing funding for Community Health Centers for two more years, the bill extends funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program

for four years beyond the six approved last month; repeals the controversial (but never implemented) Independent Payment Advisory Board for Medicare and permanently repeals Medicare's caps on certain types of outpatient therapy. Also, the final enrollment numbers for individual insurance purchased under the Affordable Care Act came out this week. Spoiler: They are

higher than most analysts expected. Plus, Andy Slavitt, former acting head of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services under President Barack Obama, talks about his new group, "The United States of Care."

This week's panelists for KHN's "What the Health?" are Julie Rovner of Kaiser Health News, Joanne Kenen of Politico, Alice Ollstein of Talking Points Memo and Margot Sanger-Katz of The New York Times.

Among the takeaways from this week's podcast:

Subscribe to KHN's free Morning Briefing.

Plus, for "extra credit," the panelists recommend their favorite health stories of the week they think you should read, too.

Julie Rovner: Vox.com, "Why a Simple, Lifesaving Rabies Shot Can Cost \$10,000 in America," by Sarah Kliff.

SENIOR HAPPENINGS

- A candy sale will take place Feb. 12-14 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. each day. Remember your sweetheart with sweets on Valentine's Day. Stop by the Tech Nook (near the lobby of The Hub on Smith) to shop for fine chocolates and confections from the Chocolate Tree.
- A winter activity informational meeting has been scheduled for Thursday at 10 a.m. The purpose of the meeting is to gather ideas and interests for outdoor

winter activities the Hub and Wyoming Wilderness Association can offer young at heart seniors. Coffee, cocoa and goodies will be provided. The meeting will take place in the community room at The Hub on Smith.

- Join in a snowshoeing hike Feb. 20. The hike will take place on Black Mountain Road in the Bighorn Mountains. Transportation will be carpooling. Gather at The Hub on Smith at 9:45 a.m. to

leave at 10 a.m. Departure from the hike site will be 2:30 p.m. Bring your own lunch and water bottle. The Wyoming Wilderness Association will provide a snack, cider and cocoa. Wear warm layers, gloves, boots and a hat. Call The Hub at (307) 672-2240 or WWA (307) 672-2751 for information on obtaining snowshoes and to sign-up by Feb. 15.

- "Conversations in History" with

Helen Laumann is set for Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. at The Hub on Smith. The topics this month are the old stage routes and PK Ranch.

- Stop by the Antique Roadshow at the Hub with Ken and Sue Heuermann, Alex Banks, Wayne Sullenger and Darla Judes. They'll combine knowledge to give their best estimate as to the value of your precious items. Save the dates: Feb. 13, March 13 and April 10. Check-in begins at 1 p.m.



FUN AND FOOD
BUILD YOUR OWN SALAD
Mondays - Fridays
Entrees include sides, dessert and drink.

Salad Bar Available
Mondays - Fridays

No Salad Bar on
Saturday or Sunday

*entree only offered for Home Delivered Meals

ENTRÉE CHOICE* or SOUP/SALAD

Tue- Taco Salad/Beef,Cheese,Chips,Salsa
Wed-Honey Glazed Ham
Thu- Beef Stroganoff
Fri- Oven Fried Chicken
Sat- Beef Fajita, Flour Tortilla
Sun - Swiss Steak in Tomato Sauce
Mon- Baked Potato Bar w/ Chill or Ham& Cheese Sauce

UPCOMING SPECIAL EVENTS

VALENTINE TRIBUTE HEARTS AT THE HUB

Tue- Antique Road Show	1:00 p.m.	Community Room
Thurs -Winter Activity Info Meeting	10:00 a.m.	Community Room
Fri - Conversation Pit	8:00 a.m.	Café
Sat- Pinochle Double Deck	12:30 p.m.	Café
Mon- Cardio Dance	8:00 a.m.	Fitness Room

Lunch Service Hours: 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., 365 days a year at 211 Smith Street
Home Delivered Meals (307) 672-6079

Loan Closet, Outreach, and Administration Services, 672-2240. Mondays - Fridays.

Help at Home Services, 675-1978. 232 North Brooks: Mondays - Fridays.

Day Break Adult Care Services, 674-4968. 241 Smith Street: Mondays - Fridays.