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Flu cases already more than triple the amount of last year

Local clinic sees more pneumonia cases

Hockessin Community News - January 8, 2004 - Page 9

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There have been more than triple the amount of flu cases this year in Delaware as compared to last year and the disease is only at the halfway mark of the season.

There were 123 confirmed cases in Delaware last year, when the flu season began in mid-January, said Delaware Division of Public Health spokeswoman Heidi Truschel-Light. So far this year, the First State has had 384 confirmed flu cases, with 45 percent of them occurring in New Castle County.

The state's first case of influenza was diagnosed November 14, two months earlier than last year's first case, said Truschel-Light. Normally, the flu doesn't become prevalent until after the new year.

The age range for flu victims this year is 21 days old through 86 years old, with 351 of the victims below age 30, Truschel-Light said. That accounts for 91 percent of the cases.

None of the cases have been fatal but the state has characterized its incidents of the flu as widespread to the CDC (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Truschel-Light said. "I think doctors reporting of flu is probably partly higher than last year because the flu outbreak in Colorado raised awareness of the value of keeping the statistics. But, this is probably the tip of the iceberg."

"These are probably just the people who got sent to the lab," she said. "There are others diagnosed with just symptoms and there are others toughing it out at home. But it is an indicator that it's a lot more active this year."

Delaware vaccinated more people than ever for the viral infection this year, Truschel-Light said.

The flu causes 36,000 deaths in the U.S. each year on average, (mostly among people over 65, because they are at higher risk of contracting pneumonia with the flu) and 114,000 hospitalizations in the U.S., according to the CDC.

Symptoms include fever, chills, muscle aches, headaches, malaise, cough, sore throat and runny nose. Children may also experience earaches, nausea and vomiting.

Since the flu outbreak began, the Hockessin Walk-in Medical Center has sent seven people to the hospital with pneumonia, said Dr. Vincent Schaller.

"We've seen over 150 cases of pneumonia in last few months, quite a lot for a facility of this size," he said. "That's 2 1/2 cases a day. We have been seeing seven to 11 cases of the flu and pneumonia each week since the flu hit the area in November."

When the flu becomes fatal, it is usually because of the secondary infection of pneumonia, a bacterial infection, Schaller said.

The Hockessin center is a secondary provider that treats patients during evening and weekend hours or when primary care givers are too busy, Schaller said.

"Our office is like a thermometer gauge and the community is sick," Schaller said. "I'm seeing the safety net bulging with pneumonia. The whole health care system is stressed out in this area."

The volume of patients at Christiana Care's emergency rooms at Christiana Hospital and Wilmington Hospital have increased significantly as well, said Dr. Robert Rosenbaum, emergency medicine physician at Christiana Care.

A lot of viral illnesses have all hit at the same

closer contact with each other," Rosenbaum said.

The increase in patients seeking treatment is attributed, in part, to the flu and flu-like illnesses, which can be any number of viral infections, according to local medical officials.

"I would still say the majority of viruses are not influenza," Rosenbaum said. "They are viruses, but people still pretty still feel miserable. Lung and emphysema problems are worse as a result."

But, Rosenbaum said he would not make necessarily link the flu with higher cases of pneumonia. If a person is exposed to the bacteria that causes pneumonia, they will get sick.

"I think that with any year that we start to get viral infections, there are healthy people who could contract pneumonia and people less healthy who can contract it," he said. "If (the flu) can put them at risk, but I don't think you can make the leap that more people are getting pneumonia as a result."

Dr. Cynthia Gabrielli, in Pike Creek, said complications are always possible, particularly with children.

"The person's overall health or their prevalence to something like that, such as history of chronic bronchitis, would lend them to develop an illness like that as opposed to a normal, healthy person," Gabrielli said. "I think you have to put that all in perspective."

"We see a lot of viral illnesses," she said. "I'm seeing a lot of flu-like illnesses. But in pediatrics, you see your typical bronchitis (cases), ear infections and run of the mill illnesses of the season no matter what."

The state does not keep track of the number pneumonia cases because it is a general medical term for an infection of the lungs, Truschel-Light said.

People who have a fever, feel tired, are coughing, have trouble breathing, can't keep food or liquids down, can't take daily medicines for other medical problems, generally feel uncomfortable and can't get relief from over the counter medicines should contact their doctor, Rosenbaum said.

"First thing, is stay well hydrated, and well rested," he said. "Being dehydrated even to a moderate degree is one of the things that makes people feel so lousy — feeling tired, headache, fatigue body aches, headaches are some of the principal complaints."

The flu virus was a different strain this year and the vaccine wasn't always effective, said Dr. Bonni Field, a pediatrician in Pike Creek.

Parents should trust their instinct when deciding when to bring their children in to the doctor's office, Field said. Parents should watch for listlessness and dehydration, which can make children more susceptible to contracting pneumonia.

"Basically, what we worry about is a child who doesn't care, doesn't want to be held and is acting like a rag doll," she said. "If you give something to the child for fever or still lies around or is having difficulty breathing or breathing fast, pale, those are the things we worry about."

Field urged parents to teach their children to wash their hands frequently, to cough into their elbows instead of their hands and to avoid large crowds.