

Flu season may strike earlier

Bad strain hits Hawaii two months sooner than usual

By Joyce Price
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The flu season usually begins after Thanksgiving, but there are indications it could arrive earlier this year — and it could be especially deadly.

That's because there's already been a big outbreak in Hawaii, which says it normally doesn't see flu before November or December. This year, Hawaii already has reported more than 100 cases of influenza.

Dr. Paul Glezen, epidemiologist with the Influenza Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, said that given its early activity in Hawaii, officials have to be concerned about flu's early arrival elsewhere in the country.

"It is unusual for this to happen [so early]," said Patrick Johnston, spokesman for the Hawaii State Health Department. Because it's occurred "noticeably," state health officials will soon meet with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to discuss it.

Lee Schmeltz, coordinator of U.S. influenza surveillances for the CDC, said past flu outbreaks have tended to move from west to east in this country.

"But any more, because of all the international travel, it really doesn't have a pattern," Mrs. Schmeltz said.

Locally, public health officials are aware of the earlier-than-usual influenza outbreaks in Hawaii but say it will not affect their vaccination schedules.

Maureen McCleary, director of epidemiology and disease control for the Prince George's County Health Department, said the county plans to begin its immunization programs in October, as it normally does.

Of the 113 flu cases reported in Hawaii this summer, all but two have been from a strain identified as A-Wuhan.

Dr. Nancy Arden, an epidemiologist in the influenza branch of the CDC, said A-Wuhan is part of the influenza subgroup, Type A-H3N2, which has been responsible for high mortality in the past.

"In an average season, the flu kills about 20,000 Americans ... but Type A-H3N2, which has been around since 1968, can cause 40,000 deaths," she said.

Most of the deaths caused by Type A-H3N2 occur among those over 65 years old and those with chronic lung and heart diseases.

"The highest flu-attack rates are with children, but the highest complication rates are in the elderly," she said.

Despite the early flu outbreaks in Hawaii, Dr. Arden said there are "not indications right now we have early activity [elsewhere]."

"Earlier-than-usual activity in Hawaii is not a good indication of what we can expect in the rest of the United States because it's a tropical climate," she said.

"Influenza can occur any time of the year in a tropical climate. ... It's not clear [that Hawaiian health officials] really look for flu in that state in the summertime."

If it does prove to be an early flu season, it will be the third in this

decade after the 1993-94 and 1991-92 seasons. "In 1993, we had outbreaks in Louisiana in August and September," Dr. Arden noted.

Nationally, the U.S. flu season normally peaks in January or February. "But in 1993, it peaked in December," she said.

A-Wuhan is one of three strains of flu circulating this year. Dr. Arden said the other two are A-Texas and B-Beijing. The A-Texas is classified under a subgroup of Type-A influenza that causes illness, but rarely death. "It re-emerged in 1977 so the elderly are immune to it," she said.

Influenza strains classified as B to be mild strains that spare the elderly and strike children and young adults. Only two patients in Hawaii contracted B-Beijing influenza, Mr. Johnston said.

If A-Wuhan is the predominant flu strain this year, it could mean high mortality among those at high risk who are not immunized. But Mrs. Schmeltz said it's not yet clear if one strain will dominate.

Dr. Arden said the vaccine available this year protects against all three strains of the influenza virus. She said, "We recommend that health care providers start providing vaccine in September and that vaccination programs be completed by mid-November."

Cold weather does not directly cause influenza, as many people believe. Outbreaks occur most often in winter in temperate zones.

Experts believe these cold-weather outbreaks are related to the crowding of people indoors, which gives the flu bug a greater opportunity to spread.