

Flu season not over yet, doctors say

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To those who track infectious diseases, it doesn't matter that groundhog Punxsutawney Phil predicted an early spring this year. Regardless of weather forecasts, doctors say flu season is likely to last another several weeks.

Though fluctuating temperatures don't affect [flu](#) resistance in people, the unpredictable weather of late winter and early spring can cause biological changes in viruses, said Todd Crocco, M.D., chair of the West Virginia University Department of Emergency Medicine. Basically, healthier viruses mean more unhealthy people.

West Virginia emergency rooms are welcoming a steady flow of patients displaying influenza symptoms, and flu virus infections are now at widespread levels, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). However, current case estimates are somewhat based on a little well-educated guessing, Dr. Crocco said.

"We're seeing maybe 10-12 suspected flu cases a day, but it's hard to pinpoint exact numbers because many cases are presumed. It's not always practical to test," explained Crocco. "We often have to say, 'Look, let's assume you have it, because you have all the symptoms.' And treat from there."

Crocco said there is usually an uptick in the number of presenting cases at this time of year, and the rising number of cases began around the start of February.

“These things normally run about a six-to-eight-week stretch before we see cases really decrease,” he said. “We’re not quite halfway there.”

Influenza testing is routine with more high-risk patients who display symptoms, such as the elderly, the chronically ill and the very young. Diagnosed flu cases in these groups are up this season, Crocco said.

Crocco said the media attention devoted to H1N1 ([swine flu](#)) in the fall of 2009 greatly increased the number of [flu shot](#) recipients. Even though the swine flu vaccination was initially needed in addition to the regular seasonal flu shot, people made an effort to receive both – and the traditional late winter [flu season](#) saw less cases than usual.

According to Rashida Khakoo, M.D., section chief of Infectious Diseases at WVU, this season’s vaccine was formulated to protect against three influenza strains, including H1N1. Khakoo said swine flu (H1N1) cases account for about half of this year’s cases, and that even late in the season, people should do all they can to avoid contracting the virus.

A key preventive measure is getting a flu shot, which are still available from most doctors’ offices, pharmacies and health departments.

In addition, you can prevent the spread of flu by taking a few simple but effective extra measures:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you are sick with flu-like illness, CDC recommends that you stay

home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. (Your fever should be gone without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.)

- While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.

“We cannot get complacent,” said Dr. Khakoo. “We need to continue preventive strategies.”

Provided by West Virginia University

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