

UK Flusurvey set to go viral

November 21 2012

Does "man flu" exist? How effective is the flu vaccine? And do pets keep you healthy? These are just some of the questions scientists from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine want to explore as they launch a nationwide flu survey.

The annual UK Flusurvey goes live for 2012-13 today. It aims to collect data from men and women of all ages around the country, in order to map trends as seasonal [flu](#) takes hold, enabling researchers to analyse how the virus spreads and who it affects. Anyone can take part in Flusurvey and it only takes a couple of minutes each week.

The online questionnaire at www.flusurvey.org.uk allows people to report their symptoms directly and the data is supplied to the Health Protection Agency's national surveillance programmes.

Results from previous years of the Flusurvey suggest men are less likely than women to report flu-like illness. In fact, women had about a 16% higher risk of reporting flu-like symptoms.

But in a bid to work out if "man flu" is real, researchers hope to find out more about gender differences to determine if men are more likely to have severe symptoms or if there is any evidence that they make more of a fuss than women. They are also interested in exploring if owning a cat or dog reduces the risk of reporting flu-like symptoms and comparing flu levels in different age groups and regions.

Last year was one of the mildest flu years reported but despite that about

30% of people in the United Kingdom and Europe reported having some flu-like illness.

It is not possible to predict if and when seasonal flu will affect people this year but the Flusurvey team is keen to encourage people to sign up now to help find out. The more people who participate the more information they will be able to collect to increase understanding and help medics and health services prepare. Traditional monitoring methods rely on data from GPs or hospitals. The Flusurvey provides a unique insight because many people with flu-like illness do not visit a doctor.

Other findings from 2011-12 included:

- Vaccination protected against flu - people who were not vaccinated reported more than 10% more flu-like symptoms than vaccinated people throughout Europe. This was in a year with very little flu. In a year with normal amounts of flu, the researchers would expect this figure to be much higher.
- Staying off the train or bus didn't stop you getting flu - results suggested that people who regularly used public transport were no more likely to develop flu-like illnesses than people who did not use public transport.
- Having children was a risk factor for reporting flu-like illness. People with children reported 14% more flu-like illness compared with people who didn't have children.
- The pattern of people reporting flu-like illnesses was very similar in the UK and Europe.

Dr Alma Adler, Research Fellow in the Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, who is running the UK Flusurvey project, said: "We are really grateful to everyone who took part in the UK Flusurvey previously and

encourage them to come back again this year to help this important citizen science project.

"We also appeal to newcomers to join in.

"By spending a few minutes every week participants provide crucial data for increasing our knowledge of flu, monitoring its spread and developing methods to improve the handling of outbreaks of the virus. [Seasonal flu](#) can be a serious illness, potentially fatal in some cases, and we want to help the quest to keep people healthy."

More information: To take part in the UK Flusurvey go to www.flusurvey.org.uk

Flusurvey is on Facebook - www.facebook.com/pages/flusurveyorguk/220599440047 and Twitter - @flusurvey

Provided by London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Citation: UK Flusurvey set to go viral (2012, November 21) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-11-uk-flusurvey-viral.html>

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