

Flu emergency declared in NY; 20K cases in state

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New York's governor declared a public health emergency Saturday for the state because of the severity of the flu season, as officials across the U.S. grapple with the worst flu outbreak in several years.

New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's executive order suspends for the next month the state law that limits the authority of pharmacists to administer immunizing agents only to individuals 18 years of age or older. Pharmacists now will also be allowed to administer [flu vaccinations](#) to patients between 6 months and 18 years of age.

The order comes as nearly 20,000 cases of influenza have been reported in New York state this season. That's more than four times the 4,400 positive [laboratory tests](#) reported all of last season.

Health officials report that the [flu](#) is now widespread in all but three states. There was one bit of good news Friday with the number of hard-hit areas declining.

The [flu season](#) in the U.S. got under way a month early, in December, driven by a strain that tends to make people sicker. That led to worries that it might be a bad season, following one of the mildest flu seasons in recent memory.

The latest numbers do show that the flu surpassed an "epidemic" threshold last week. That is based on deaths from pneumonia and [influenza](#) in 122 U.S. cities. However, it's not unusual—the epidemic

level varies at different times of the year, and it was breached earlier this flu season, in October and November.

And there's a hint that the flu season may already have peaked in some spots, like in the South. Still, officials there and elsewhere are bracing for more sickness.

Despite the early start, health officials say it's not too late to get a flu shot. The vaccine is considered a good—though not perfect—protection against getting really sick from the flu.

Flu was widespread in 47 states last week, up from 41 the week before, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) said on Friday. The only states without widespread flu were California, Mississippi and Hawaii.

The number of hard-hit states fell to 24 from 29, where larger numbers of people were treated for flu-like illness. Now off that list: Florida, Arkansas and South Carolina in the South, the first region hit this flu season.

Recent flu reports included holiday weeks when some doctor's offices were closed, so it will probably take a couple more weeks to get a better picture, CDC officials said Friday. Experts say so far say the season looks moderate.

"Only time will tell how moderate or severe this flu season will be," CDC Director Dr. Thomas Frieden said Friday in a teleconference with reporters.

The government doesn't keep a running tally of adult deaths from the flu, but estimates that it kills about 24,000 people in an average year. Nationally, 20 children have died from the flu this season.

Flu vaccinations are recommended for everyone 6 months or older. Since the swine flu epidemic in 2009, vaccination rates have increased in the U.S., but more than half of Americans haven't gotten this year's vaccine.

Nearly 130 million doses of flu vaccine were distributed this year, and at least 112 million have been used. Vaccine is still available, but supplies may have run low in some locations, officials said.

To find a shot, "you may have to call a couple places," said Dr. Patricia Quinlisk, who tracks the flu in Iowa.

In midtown Manhattan, Hyrmete Sciuto got a flu shot Friday at a drugstore. She skipped it in recent years, but news reports about the flu this week worried her.

During her commute from Edgewater, New Jersey, by ferry and bus, "I have people coughing in my face," she said. "I didn't want to risk it this year."

The vaccine is no guarantee, though, that people won't get sick. On Friday, CDC officials said a recent study of more than 1,100 people has concluded the current flu vaccine is 62 percent effective. That means the average vaccinated person is 62 percent less likely to get a case of flu that sends them to the doctor, compared to people who don't get the vaccine. That's in line with other years.

The vaccine is reformulated annually, and this year's is a good match to the viruses going around.

The flu's early arrival coincided with spikes in flu-like illnesses caused by other bugs, including a new norovirus that causes vomiting and diarrhea, or what is commonly known as "stomach flu." Those illnesses

likely are part of the heavy traffic in hospital and clinic waiting rooms, CDC officials said.

Europeans also are suffering an early flu season, though a milder strain predominates there. China, Japan, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Algeria and the Republic of Congo have also reported increasing flu.

Flu usually peaks in midwinter. Symptoms can include fever, cough, runny nose, head and body aches and fatigue. Some people also suffer vomiting and diarrhea, and some develop pneumonia or other severe complications.

Most people with flu have a mild illness. But people with severe symptoms need to see a doctor. They may be given antiviral drugs or other medications to ease symptoms.

Some shortages have been reported for children's liquid Tamiflu, a prescription medicine used to treat flu. But [health officials](#) say adult Tamiflu pills are available, and pharmacists can convert those to doses for children.

More information: CDC flu: www.cdc.gov/flu/index.htm

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