

Just how severe is this flu season?

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It may be easing already in parts of the U.S., ramping up in others, experts say.

(HealthDay)—If the headlines are any indication, this year's flu season is turning out to be a whopper.

Boston and New York state have declared states of emergency, [vaccine supplies](#) are running out in spots, and some emergency departments are overwhelmed. And the drug Tamiflu, used to treat flu symptoms, is reportedly in short supply.

But is the situation as bad as it seems? The bottom line: It's too early in the flu season to say for sure, according to [health experts](#).

Certainly there are worrying signs.

"This year there is a higher number of positive tests coming back," said Dr. Lewis Marshall Jr., chairman of the department of [emergency medicine](#) at Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center in New York City. "Emergency rooms are experiencing an influx of people.

People are trying to find the vaccine and having a hard time due to the fact that it's so late in the vaccination season."

But the vaccine is still available, said Dr. Margaret Hamburg, commissioner of the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#), in a statement Tuesday.

"[The] FDA has approved [influenza vaccines](#) from seven manufacturers, and collectively they have produced an estimated 135 million doses of this season's [flu vaccine](#) for the U.S.," Hamburg said. "We have received reports that some consumers have found spot shortages of the vaccine. We are monitoring this situation."

Consumers can go to [flu.gov](#) to find local sources for flu shots, including clinics, supermarkets and pharmacies, she said.

For people who have the flu, she said, "be assured that [the] FDA is working to make sure that medicine to treat [flu symptoms](#) is available for all who need it. We do anticipate intermittent, temporary shortages of the oral suspension form of [Tamiflu](#)—the liquid version often prescribed for children—for the remainder of the flu season. However, [the]FDA is working with the manufacturer to increase supply."

The flu season seems to have started earlier than usual. A report Friday from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said 47 states were reporting widespread influenza activity, up from 41 earlier the week before.

But the report also stated that the flu has begun to subside in some areas, especially in the Southeast, where it first showed up. And doctors' visits for flu have dropped, a CDC spokesman said.

This is typical of a famously unpredictable virus.

"One of the characteristics of flu is that you see lots of geographic differences in the impact and timing of epidemics, so while you might see an outbreak start to go away in one area, it might be just beginning in another area," said Dr. John Treanor, chief of infectious diseases at the University of Rochester Medical Center, in New York. "I wouldn't be surprised at all to see a decline in the number of cases in the Northeast but at the same time see more cases developing in the West."

Marshall said flu activity generally peaks in late January, but it's unclear if this year's early start means the flu also will peak early.

Other factors may be complicating the issue.

For instance, last year's season was relatively mild, which may have "magnified the perception that this year is more severe," Treanor said. Although, he added, this year "is a relatively more severe outbreak than we've seen in the U.S. for several years, so it's probably a combination of both things."

The flu this year isn't necessarily causing more severe illness, at least not across the board.

This year's H3N2 virus is generally characterized by higher rates of illness in older people and correspondingly higher rates of hospital admissions and deaths, Treanor said.

The FDA's Hamburg said, "Although the last year's flu season was relatively mild, this season is turning out to be more severe. On the positive side, the vaccine is well matched this season to the circulating virus strains that are causing influenza."

The bottom line is that no one knows what kind of flu season this year is going to turn out to be.

"Projection is very difficult," said Dr. Kenneth Bromberg, chairman of pediatrics and director of the Vaccine Research Center at Brooklyn Hospital Center in New York City. "You have no idea what's going to happen."

Treanor agreed. "If you've seen one flu season, you've seen one [flu season](#)," he said.

More information: For more about the flu, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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