

# National project tracks the spread of UK flu and extends monitoring to schools

November 13 2013

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Are Northerners really more likely to get flu? Does regular exercise help you to recover faster? And what impact will the new childhood flu vaccinations have on the spread of the virus in schools? These are just some of the questions scientists from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine want to explore as they launch the annual nationwide Flusurvey, collecting data from men, women and children of all ages around the country.

To coincide with the launch, new findings released today from the 2012-13 Flusurvey reveal:

- People in North England and Scotland were slightly more likely to report having flu-like symptoms than people living in the Midlands, South England and Wales\*
- People aged under 18 years old were most likely to report having flu-like symptoms and on average missed three days of school when they were ill
- Women were 18% more likely than men to report flu-like symptoms
- People with underlying health conditions were 18% more likely to report flu-like symptoms
- Smokers were 12% more likely to report having flu-like symptoms than non-smokers
- People who have sustained contact with children were 17% more likely to report flu-like symptoms

The annual UK Flusurvey, now in its fifth year, collects data through an online questionnaire at [flusurvey.org.uk](http://flusurvey.org.uk) in order to map trends as seasonal flu takes hold, enabling researchers to analyse how the virus spreads and who it affects. This data is supplied weekly to Public Health England's national flu surveillance programmes. Anyone can take part in Flusurvey and it only takes a couple of minutes each week.

For the first time, researchers will be working with the British Science Association to link up with schools for the 2013-14 flu season to monitor the impact of the virus in UK classrooms. Researchers will also be looking at the role exercise and diet has to play in keeping flu at bay.

More than 6,000 people took part in the UK Flusurvey last year. Previously released findings dispelled the myth that taking public transport makes you more likely to get flu, and also showed that "man flu" does not really exist.

Dr Alma Adler, Research Fellow at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, who is running the UK Flusurvey project, said: "Last year we found that taking public transport does not increase your risk of catching flu and we discovered that 'man flu' didn't really exist – in fact women were slightly more likely to report feeling worse when they have flu than men. This year we're keen to find out more about children because they are the 'key spreaders' of flu and the group who reported the most flu-like illness in last year's survey. With the NHS beginning to roll out childhood [flu vaccinations](#) this year, it's an exciting time to see how this might change the way the virus spreads.

"Catching flu can be serious, potentially fatal in some cases. If participants can spare just a couple of minutes each week providing us with crucial data, we will increase our knowledge of flu and develop new methods to improve the handling of outbreaks of the virus."

Researchers are calling for members of the public and schools across the UK to sign up to help collect as much data as possible in order to map this year's flu trends and to help medics and health services prepare. Traditional monitoring methods rely on data from GPs or hospitals, but Flusurvey provides a unique insight because many people with flu-like illness do not visit a doctor.

Schools participating in the Flusurvey will also gain access to scientific data during National Science & Engineering Week, run by the British Science Association, in March 2014. Students will be able to analyse anonymised data showing the volume of flu cases and factors affecting its transmission, potentially relating to their local area or even their own school.

Commenting on the project, Imran Khan, CEO of the British Science Association, said: "UK school children will be at the forefront of science helping researchers understand more about [flu](#) in a landmark year for study of the virus. As well as being an important part of collating the data, they will also have the chance to examine the latest findings and trends, which may even relate to their local school or area. We hope this opportunity to engage with a live science project will show the important role that science has in many aspects of their lives."

Provided by London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Citation: National project tracks the spread of UK flu and extends monitoring to schools (2013, November 13) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-11-national-tracks-uk-flu-schools.html>

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