

## Free home flu test kits for Flusurvey participants

November 18 2014

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Flusurvey coordinator Clare Wenham uses the nasal swab kit. Credit: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

People taking part in this year's Flusurvey, the UK's biggest crowd-sourced study of influenza will for the first time be offered a swab to confirm if their symptoms are caused by a flu virus or not as part of a new collaboration with i-sense. Data from social media and internet searches will also be combined with Flusurvey, allowing flu trends to be

monitored across the UK more accurately and earlier than ever before.

Flusurvey scientists at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine will analyse weekly information relating to symptoms, provided in an online questionnaire by participants, to monitor if flu is taking hold over the winter months.

They will team up with Public Health England (PHE) and i-sense, an £11M EPSRC funded interdisciplinary research collaboration led by UCL to develop early warning sensing systems for infectious disease, to compare this information with the results of swab samples and with 'big data' on millions of symptoms reported every day via sources such as Twitter.

Complaints of coughs, colds and flu-like symptoms are a common feature of life at this time of year but not all sniffles are a sign of flu. Verifying cases of a virus through testing is a crucial part of efforts to spot a pandemic flu outbreak with the potential to cause serious illness and death, and Flusurvey data feeds into national surveillance programmes.

This year, some participants who sign up at <http://www.flusurvey.org.uk> will provide a self-administered nasal swab, enabling official confirmation and a more accurate picture of flu trends in the UK.

Swabs will be sent to 700 participants of different ages and in different locations, selected to represent the population as a whole. If they report an [influenza](#)-like illness in their weekly Flusurvey update, they will use the swab themselves at home and see the results in a matter of minutes - much like a home pregnancy test. They will submit their results via email as well as posting the test to a PHE laboratory for verification.

The number of positive tests received each week will be compared to

figures obtained by GP-based virological sampling run by PHE for the same week.

UK Flusurvey's coordinator, Clare Wenham, Research Fellow in Public Health Engagement at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said: "Virological swabbing is an exciting development of the Flusurvey project as it is going to allow us to see whether those who report symptoms online actually are suffering from a [flu virus](#) or something else entirely. This way we can get a much better understanding of the burden of flu at any one time in the UK.

"The ability to rapidly detect a novel strain of influenza is often hampered as most cases do not present at primary care, and the symptoms associated with flu are shared by many diseases. Piloting a system of detecting influenza in the community by self-administered swabbing, linked to an existing internet-based cohort, should enable rapid detection of influenza in the future."

Professor Rachel McKendry, Director of i-sense at UCL, added: "This exciting project will identify flu outbreaks much earlier than ever before and help us to develop a new generation of mobile phone-connected tests allowing people to report their symptoms and self-test in their own homes. Throughout this flu season, i-sense researchers at UCL will be using this data to develop a mobile app which will provide up to the minute information about flu hotspots. In future, mobile phone connected tests could also help patients gain more rapid access to follow up care."

The annual UK Flusurvey, now in its sixth year, collects data from men, women and children of all ages around the country. This is used to map trends as seasonal flu takes hold, enabling researchers to analyse how a virus spreads and who it may affect. The data is supplied weekly to PHE's national flu surveillance programmes. Anyone can take part in

Flusurvey and it only takes a couple of minutes each week.

New findings released today from last year's survey reveal that every person suffering from a flu-like illness loses the equivalent of two days of healthy life.<sup>1</sup> More than 5,000 people took part in the UK Flusurvey last year.

In previous years, Flusurvey data has revealed that doing vigorous exercise for at least 2.5 hours a week reduces your chances of experiencing a flu-like illness by around 10%, dispelled the myth that taking public transport makes you more likely to get flu, and shown that "man flu" does not really exist.

Researchers are calling for members of the public across the UK to sign up to participate in order to collect as much data as possible 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.

Flusurvey is linked with comparable surveys in 10 European countries: France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Online maps make it possible to track the spread of seasonal [flu](#) across the continent.

Provided by London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Citation: Free home flu test kits for Flusurvey participants (2014, November 18) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-free-home-flu-kits-flusurvey.html>

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