

US flu activity low right now, but rising: CDC

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(HealthDay)—Flu season is getting off to a slow but steady start, a U.S.

health official said Friday.

As of now, only Georgia is seeing high levels of infections, but cases are being reported throughout the nation.

"Flu activity is still fairly low, but as expected we have been seeing activity slowly increasing over the last few weeks," said Alicia Budd, an epidemiologist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's too soon to tell how bad this year's flu season will be. "Unfortunately, we don't have a [crystal ball](#) to know how badly we are going to fare during this [flu season](#)," Budd said.

Peak activity can occur anytime between December and February, she said.

The most common type of flu around now is influenza A H1N1, which is accounting for about 80 percent of the flu viruses being reported, Budd said.

In addition, another A strain, H3N2, is also being seen, making up about 20 percent of the viruses reported, she said.

"H3N2 is out there, but at much lower levels than we saw last year," Budd said. It was that strain that made flu so severe last year, when 1 million people were hospitalized and 80,000 died.

Both of these types of flu are included in this season's flu vaccine, as well as one or two influenza B strains. This year's vaccine seems well matched to these strains, so it will most likely be more effective than last year's vaccine, Budd said.

Because H1N1 is the predominant flu strain around now, she thinks the

vaccine's effectiveness could be as high as 65 percent.

It's not too late to get vaccinated, Budd said. If you haven't gotten a flu shot, it's time, she said. It can take up to two weeks for your body to mount a protective immune response.

"Now is the time to get vaccinated while [flu activity](#) is low, especially if you're going to get together with family over the holidays," Budd said.

She said lots of vaccine is available. Since Nov. 30, nearly 164 million doses have been distributed, Budd said.

"We know that the vaccine is effective in preventing millions of cases and hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations," she said. "It's the best tool we have to prevent influenza."

Although getting the vaccine is no guarantee that you won't get the flu, if you do, it will be much milder than if you hadn't been vaccinated, Budd said.

Vaccination protects not only you from getting the flu, but also those around you from getting it.

The CDC urges that everyone ages 6 months and older get a flu shot. It's especially important for the very young and old and for anyone with a chronic medical condition. Those are the folks most at risk for succumbing to the complications of flu, such as pneumonia.

In addition, [pregnant women](#) should get vaccinated, as should moms of infants too young to get a flu shot and those likely to be around babies.

Budd stressed that the [vaccine](#) can't give you the flu. If you get sick after getting vaccinated, it's most likely from another of the many respiratory

viruses around, not the flu virus.

It's also possible that you were exposed to flu before you got your shot, she said.

If you do come down with flu, Budd said to try to stay away from other people so you won't spread the disease.

In addition, antiviral medications such as Tamiflu and Relenza are available and effective in making your bout of flu easier and shorter, Budd said.

These are particularly useful for people at risk for getting serious complications from flu, she said.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the [flu](#).

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