

U.S. flu cases hit 7 million mark: CDC

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(HealthDay)—The flu season is picking up steam, with about 7 million Americans having been infected with a strain of the flu virus, health officials said Friday.

Almost half of those folks went to a doctor, while between 69,000 and 84,000 people have been hospitalized for flu-related illness, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a new release.

Last week, nine states and New York City were reporting high flu activity, and it was widespread in 24 states. Updated numbers on how far the flu has spread had not been released as of Friday morning.

The most common type of flu around is still the influenza A strain H1N1. That strain has been circulating and was pandemic in 2009 and in 1918.

In 1918, H1N1 flu killed 50 million people around the world. But the current vaccine works exceedingly well against H1N1—it is up to 65 percent effective, which is highly effective for a [flu vaccine](#), according to the CDC.

"H1N1 is the most common [strain] in most of the country," Lynette Brammer, head of the CDC's domestic influenza surveillance team, said last week. "But it's odd that in the Southeast, the H3N2 virus is more common."

The influenza A H3N2 strain is the one that made last year's [flu season](#) so severe. When that strain predominated, nearly 1 million Americans were hospitalized and 80,000 died.

According to the CDC, flu activity has been high in Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah and Virginia.

The CDC doesn't track adult deaths from flu, but they do keep tabs on pediatric deaths. As of last week, that total was 13.

"There's still a lot more flu season to come," Brammer said last week. "I expect activity to continue for several more weeks."

The best way to protect yourself and those around you is to get a [flu shot](#), and there's still plenty of time to get vaccinated, she said.

"Anybody who hasn't been vaccinated should go and get vaccinated," Brammer said. This year's vaccine is well matched to the circulating [strains](#) of flu and a lot of vaccine is available, she added.

The CDC recommends that everyone 6 months and older get vaccinated. Getting your kids their flu shot is the best way to protect them and prevent deaths from the complications of flu, Brammer said.

Getting a flu shot should be at the top of the list for those at [high risk](#) for flu, including the elderly, pregnant women, and people with heart disease or lung disease.

Getting vaccinated won't guarantee that you won't come down with flu, but if you do, your illness will be milder, health experts say.

If you get the flu, antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu and Relenza can make your illness less severe. But if you're sick, the CDC recommends that you stay home so you won't infect others.

Brammer can't predict when the flu season will peak, but it most likely won't be until the end of February or March. So there's still a long way to go, she said.

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

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