

# Influenza cases on the rise in South Africa

The influenza (flu) season is upon us in the Southern Hemisphere. According to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), in South Africa the 2022 flu season started in the week commencing 25 April - and numbers appear to have been increasing over the past few weeks.



Source: Supplied.

A similar trend has been evident with data from Australia, where cases tripled from 25 April compared to the previous two weeks, and the numbers of cases and hospitalisations may continue to climb. It is reported in both Australia and SA that the 2022 flu season may be longer and more severe.

Flu is a respiratory tract infection caused by an influenza virus infection that can spread quickly, causing seasonal epidemics that may result in people becoming severely ill or even dying. Each year, flu causes up to 650,000 deaths worldwide, with the highest numbers in sub-Saharan Africa.

Annually, there are over 11,000 flu-related deaths in SA, and almost half of the close to 50,000 people experiencing severe flu may need to be hospitalised.

## SA's flu season

Flu viruses circulate at different times of the year, but in SA our seasonal flu usually has the most impact between May and September.

Dr Lourens Terblanche, medical head of Sanofi South Africa, says: “Right now, there appears to be a general increase in cases of flu both locally and abroad. While non-pharmaceutical interventions like lockdowns, social distancing and mask wearing related to the Covid-19 pandemic afforded less opportunity for the influenza virus to circulate, the easing of these mandatory restrictions may facilitate a surge in flu cases.”

The World Health Organization and the NICD state that flu vaccination is the most effective way to prevent disease and reduce the risk of getting severely ill.

Says Dr Terblanche: “In SA, annual flu vaccination is recommended for individuals at high risk of complications or severe outcomes of influenza. The vaccine is however available for any individual from the age of six months to help prevent influenza infection.”

## **Those at high risk**

Groups targeted as high risk in the Department of Health’s 2022 flu vaccination campaign are healthcare workers, persons aged 65 or older, those with cardiovascular disease (including chronic heart disease, hypertension, stroke, and diabetes), chronic lung disease (including asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and people living with HIV, as well as pregnant women.

“Even in the absence of specific comorbidities, it is important to recognise persons aged over 65 years - or younger than two years - as being at risk, as well as pregnant women too,” says Terblanche.

The Director General of Health has indicated that the flu vaccine may now be given at the same time as a Covid-19 vaccine, with each being given in a different arm.

It’s not too late to protect against flu through vaccinations. Ask your doctor, pharmacist, or healthcare provider for more information about getting vaccinated against the flu this season.

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