

January 2018 Flu Outbreak

Talking Points

The sudden escalation of flu cases throughout California and across the nation has caught the attention of hospitals, clinicians, public health experts and the media. The flu is a seasonal illness that typically occurs in the U.S. between October and May, generally peaking in February. This year, however, the outbreak may be peaking earlier; we may also be experiencing a particularly bad flu year. According to an [article in the Los Angeles Times](#), the number of Californians under 65 who have died of the flu has jumped to 42, compared with nine at the same time last year. Many hospitals across the state are seeing a substantial increase in emergency department volume and inpatient admissions.

A contributing factor this year is a possible mismatch between one strain of the flu and this year's flu vaccine. The predominate flu this year is H3N2, which is a form of influenza A. Although this strain is included in this year's vaccine, there is some question as to the vaccine's effectiveness. According to the New England Journal of Medicine, an interim report indicates the current vaccine was only 10 percent effective against H3N2 in Australia, which just completed its flu season.

- Although this year's flu season has taken off with a vengeance, California's hospitals and caregivers are well prepared for the challenge.
- The outbreak of the flu is a seasonal occurrence that happens every year, typically between October and May. Flu season generally peaks in February, although this year's outbreak appears to be peaking a bit earlier. Regardless of when the high point of flu season strikes — or how severe the outbreak is — providing care to everyone in need is what hospitals do every day.
- Every California hospital maintains a "surge plan" that can be implemented whenever an unexpected influx of patients occurs. These plans detail the steps the hospital will take to ensure that patients receive timely access to care; they may include the establishment of alternative triage areas (separate from the emergency department) in which patients can be evaluated by clinical personnel or expedited discharge processes for hospitalized patients who are ready to go home.
- Because the flu can be easily spread and some people may not initially know they have the flu, some hospitals also may restrict visiting hours or altogether prohibit visitation by

children. These steps are sometimes necessary to prevent the spread of the flu to patients who are already hospitalized for other reasons.

- There may be several reasons that this year's flu season is peaking earlier than normal, including the possibility that this year's vaccine is not as effective against the predominate strain of the flu (H3N2) as had been anticipated. Additionally, this year's flu outbreak began to escalate over the recent holiday period when more people travel and spend time with family and friends in close quarters.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, vaccine effectiveness can vary year to year — often between 40 to 60 percent. However, according to an interim report from Australia (which just completed its flu season), this year's vaccine appears to have only been about 10 percent effective against the H3N2 strain. The agency notes, however, that this year's vaccine includes the same H3N2 strain as last year; last year's overall effectiveness against this strain was 32 percent.
- Every person can take several steps to help prevent getting the flu. First and foremost, everyone should get a flu vaccination. The flu vaccine protects against the various influenza viruses that research indicates will be most common during the upcoming season. Each year, the flu vaccine is made to protect against several different strains of the flu virus. Thus, even when there is a less than optimal match or lower effectiveness against one of the viruses, it is important to remember that the vaccine is designed to protect against multiple strains of the flu.
- Additional steps to prevent the flu that every person can take include:
 - Wash your hands regularly.
 - If you need to cough or sneeze, cover your mouth or nose with a disposable tissue if possible. If a tissue is not handy, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve.
 - If you are coughing regularly or have a fever, do not go to school or work — stay home.
- If you do get sick, the flu vaccine may make your illness milder. Being vaccinated also helps protect the people around you — including children, seniors and those with chronic health conditions.
- If you do get sick, call your doctor first. If you do decide to go to the hospital, be patient and remember that emergency departments are busier than usual this time of year. All patients are evaluated by a clinician, and those deemed the sickest will be treated first. Thus, you could find yourself waiting in the emergency department for a few hours.