

# Australia's tough flu season may be bad news for U.S.

The U.S. may be in for a bad flu season, if Australia is anything to go by.

Experts usually look to the southern hemisphere's influenza season to predict what might start happening here in the fall, and what they are seeing doesn't look good.

Australia is suffering through one of its worst flu seasons in recent years, health officials there say.

Australia's Immunisation Coalition reported 168,337 influenza cases so far in 2017, compared to just under 91,000 in 2016 and 100,000 in 2015.

"Please note that the vast majority of people do not get tested for influenza and that there may also be some delays in reporting confirmed influenza cases," the organization said in a statement. "Therefore data presented here may be underestimating influenza activity."

## **A stronger flu strain**

The higher numbers may be partly due to better on-the-spot flu tests, Australia's health department says. But they could also be due to the dominating flu strain — one called H3N2, said Dr. Hana El Sahly, associate professor of molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine.

"Usually the influenza season in the southern hemisphere serves as a sort of a predictor of what's going to happen in the northern hemisphere," El Sahly said.

"The season in the southern hemisphere has been dominated by the H3N2 virus. This strain of influenza tends to be more severe."

Australia's flu season is just winding up — it enters spring tomorrow, just as fall comes to the U.S. The U.S. flu season generally gets well under way in October, and usually peaks in January and February.

"There is every reason to expect that we could have a severe flu season this year," said Dr. Robert Atmar, an infectious diseases expert at Baylor. "It's always hard

to predict what is going to happen, but people should be prepared.”

Of course, one of influenza’s hallmarks is that it is unpredictable. Strains mutate regularly and different strains can dominate in different countries at the same time. Flu shots protect against only some of the strains, but doctors say they’re still the best protection against serious flu.

### **Flu vaccines available**

Flu shots are already available in U.S. pharmacies and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that everyone 6 months and older get a flu vaccine every year.

“Even if it doesn’t prevent someone from catching the flu altogether it will help in making the disease milder and the complications fewer,” El Sahly said.

“Usually higher vaccinations translate into better outcomes — lowering the incidence of complications of influenza.”

One bit of bad news for kids and parents — the Flu Mist nasal spray vaccine won’t be available again this year, because CDC and other groups are still trying to figure out why it seemed to have been ineffective in protecting kids in recent flu seasons in the U.S.

Australia in general has a higher rate of vaccination against flu than the U.S. does, although the CDC complains many more Americans should get vaccinated.

About 49 percent of Australians under 65 got vaccinated in 2014. Rates rose to 80 percent of those over 65 with risk factors.

In the 2015-2016 season, about 45 percent of all Americans six months and older got vaccinated against flu. About 59 percent of kids and 41 percent of adults got flu shots.

Flu is a big killer. It killed at least 95 children in the 2016-2017 season, the CDC says. Adult deaths are calculated rather than counted individually but CDC estimates that it kills between 4,000 and 50,000 people a year, depending on how bad the flu season is..

The CDC found that at least three-quarters of kids who died from influenza between 2010 and 2014 had not been vaccinated in the months before they got

sick.

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