

MEDIA RELEASE

15 May 2019

The 'flu season is hitting hard and fast

If you haven't had your free flu vaccination, now is the time to do so – and urgently – as the flu season starts to hit the community hard and fast.

That's the message from health professionals in Nelson and Marlborough who report greater number of people admitted to hospital with serious complications caused by influenza, including at least three children.

11 people have been admitted to Wairau Hospital in Blenheim, including three children and one pregnant woman in May. At Nelson Hospital, 16 people have been admitted since April.

The tip of the iceberg

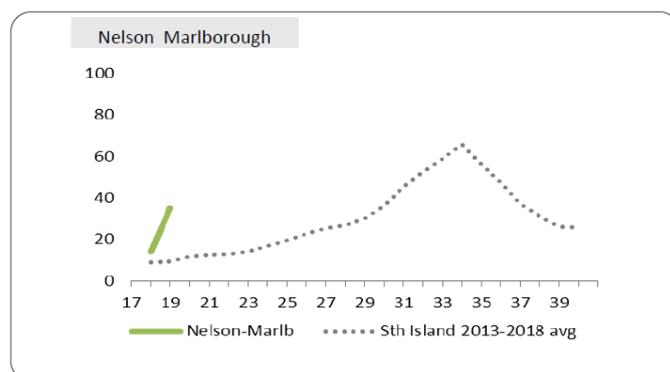
In Marlborough, Wairau Hospital Clinical Nurse Specialist (Infection Prevention) Iona Bichan describes the admissions as "the tip of the iceberg".

"As well as people being admitted to hospital with influenza, there are those who come in everyday to ED to be treated for flu symptoms and discharged.

"This is the tip of the iceberg – the fact that the numbers of people who are sick enough to have to be in hospital is so high is strongly indicative of widespread flu in the community. There will be many people seeking help from their GP or pharmacist and many more caring for themselves or their family members at home without needing medical attention," Ms Bichan says.

This is endorsed by Public Health Service Medical Officer of Health Dr Andrew Lindsay.

"The latest data for flu-like illnesses in the South Island shows that the Nelson Marlborough region is tracking much higher than the South Island average. It is also much higher than we typically see at this time of year."



Graph extracted from the 9 May South Island Influenza and Respiratory Pathogens Report produced by Canterbury DHB

Vaccination is the best protection against influenza

Dr Lindsay asks people to consider the fact that they may have the flu without knowing it.

“Around one in four New Zealanders are infected with influenza each year, some of whom will not feel sick at all but who will still pass it onto others who then may become very ill.

“Influenza is circulating in the community, meaning that you are never far from the possibility of catching it.

“By immunising against influenza you can lessen the chance of bringing it home to a baby, older relative or someone with a medical condition who could develop serious complications from influenza.”

“We encourage every person who is eligible for free vaccination to get this done as soon as possible, from their GP or from some pharmacies. We hope to see both the local and national uptake for flu vaccination increase again this year, as it did in 2018.”

Vaccination is free for:

- pregnant women
- people aged 65 or older
- people with an ongoing medical condition like asthma, diabetes or a heart or lung condition, such as those listed on this page: <https://www.fightflu.co.nz/>
- children aged 4 years or under who have been hospitalised for respiratory illness or have a history of significant respiratory illness

It is also highly likely to be free for:

- Maori and Pacifica people
- people from a refugee background
- whanau of children with a chronic condition
- whanau living with a pregnant woman or a baby under 6 months

Ask your GP if you are eligible for free vaccination.

Health workers are at risk

Clinical Nurse Specialist Barbara Gibson says that healthcare workers are vulnerable to catching, and spreading, influenza.

“This is one of our main messages to DHB employees – that vaccination is the best protection for themselves and the patients, visitors and colleagues they come into contact with.

“We are starting to see employees away from work with flu-like illnesses, or who need to be at home caring for family members,” Mrs Gibson says.

Nelson Marlborough Health offers all employees free flu vaccination; to date 50% of staff have been vaccinated and the remainder are strongly encouraged to do so to protect themselves, patients, visitors and colleagues.

If you have the flu, here’s what to do

Medical Officer of Health Dr Andrew Lindsay says that most people can care for themselves and others at home by following self-care advice and by asking Healthline nurses or the GP practice for further advice.

“One of the best things you can do is rest at home until you feel better. Stay home from work or school and away from other people while you are unwell.

“It’s also very important to wash your hands frequently and thoroughly when you are unwell, and to ‘catch’ coughs and sneezes in a tissue that can be disposed of,” Dr Lindsay says. Other things you can do are to:

- keep hydrated to replace fluids you lose because of fever and sweating
- drink mainly water and avoid tea, coffee and alcohol as they dry you out even more
- eat only light food when you are hungry
- use a damp cloth to cool your forehead and limbs

When to see a GP

Influenza is a serious, sometime fatal illness and there are symptoms to be alert to. See a GP or call Healthline (0800 611 116) immediately if you have:

- a high fever that doesn’t come down, especially if you are pregnant
- chills or severe shaking
- difficulty breathing or chest pain
- purple or bluish discolouration of lips, skin, fingers or toes
- seizures or convulsions
- has signs of other serious conditions, such as meningococcal disease.

Seek urgent advice also if your baby or child:

- is breathing fast or noisily or if they are wheezing or grunting
- is very pale
- is drowsy or difficult to wake
- is severely irritable, not wanting to be held
- is limp or unable to move
- has dry nappies or no tears when they are crying, which means they are dehydrated
- has signs of other serious conditions, such as such as meningococcal disease.

For more information about influenza symptoms, treatment and prevention

- www.fightflu.co.nz
- <https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/influenza>
- <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/i/influenza/>

Contact: comms@nmdhb.govt.nz