Understanding Influenza

Influenza (flu) is a contagious disease that can cause mild to severe symptoms and life-threatening complications, including death, even in the healthiest children and adults. Influenza viruses usually spread from one person to another through coughing or sneezing, but they can also spread when someone touches a surface with influenza virus on it and then touches their mouth, eyes, or nose. A person can pass influenza on to others even before their own symptoms start and for a week or more after symptoms begin.

Influenza Viruses Change:
Influenza viruses circulate all across the world and strike different areas at different times. In the United States, influenza activity is usually highest from October through May with cases typically peaking around February. Influenza viruses regularly change as they circulate across the globe, which is one way the disease evades the body’s immune system. These changes also affect how severe influenza cases are and how easily influenza can be transmitted. The 2013-2014 season peaked early (in late December) and was dominated by the 2009 epidemic (pH1N1) strain.

Vaccine Matched to Circulating Strains Every Year:
The strains in the vaccine are selected each year based on data from a worldwide virus tracking system that helps public health officials predict which virus strains will circulate during the influenza season. The 2014-15 influenza vaccine used in the United States contains protection against three strains of influenza (two type A strains and one type B strain). In addition, some of the vaccine supply protects against an additional type B strain.

Influenza Symptoms:
The severity of influenza varies depending on the specific viruses circulating. The number of people affected depends on how easily the circulating viruses are transmitted from person to person. The best protection against influenza is annual vaccination (for more information, see the fact sheet “Preventing Influenza”). Influenza can be distinguished from other common respiratory infections by the presence of a constellation of symptoms including:

- Fever
- Aches
- Chills
- Tiredness
- Sudden onset

Impact of Influenza:
Unlike many other viral respiratory infections, such as the common cold, the flu can cause severe illness and life-threatening complications in many people. Each year in the U.S., 5-20 percent of the population gets the flu on average, 3,000 to 49,000 deaths occur, and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized.1

The 2013-2014 season served as a reminder that influenza viruses can affect all ages and that annual vaccination is the best step to take to prevent illness from influenza and its associated complications. During the 2013-14 season:

- Persons aged 18-64 years accounted for more than half (57.4 percent) of reported hospitalizations.2 This was relatively more severe than recent influenza seasons for adults younger than 65 years.2
- A substantial portion (43 percent) of children hospitalized with confirmed influenza had no identified underlying health problems.2
- About a quarter (22.3 percent) of women of childbearing age (15-44 years) hospitalized were pregnant.2
- There were 107 confirmed influenza-associated deaths in U.S. children.3

References