

## IMPORTANT HEALTH MESSAGE – SEASONAL INFLUENZA

Dear Directors of Nursing and Care Managers

NSW Health is warning all Directors and Care Managers of residential aged care facilities to be on high alert for signs and symptoms of influenza. NSW is well into the winter influenza season with four influenza virus strains circulating. Influenza outbreaks have been already reported from a number of aged care facilities across NSW, particularly in Sydney.

It is important to ensure all residents and staff have received this year's vaccine.

Influenza is an acute, highly infectious respiratory infection which can lead to severe complications. Aged care facilities are at particular risk of influenza outbreaks which can spread quickly through residents and staff. I encourage you to make sure you are taking all appropriate measures to protect your residents and staff from serious or life-threatening illnesses associated with influenza.

To help prevent influenza outbreaks and or the spread of influenza, you should;

- Ensure that all residents and staff have received this year's 'Flu' vaccine - it is not too late to vaccinate.
- Encourage to staff to practice good hand hygiene and have good infection control practices in place.
- Advise family members and visitors who are unwell with influenza-like symptoms to delay their visits until they are well.
- Place signage at entrances the facility to alert families not to enter the facility if unwell.
- Ensure that staff are aware that if they develop influenza-like symptoms they should stay away from work until they are well.

In NSW, influenza B and the influenza A (H3N2) strains (this is not the pandemic strain) are circulating. Residents are more likely to be affected by both these types of influenza and are particularly at risk of developing complications.

To help identify and manage outbreaks you should:

- Ensure all staff are looking out for signs and symptoms of influenza in residents.
- Suspect an outbreak when there have been three residents or staff with influenza-like symptoms within three days.
- Remember that **fever may not be prominent in older residents** with influenza.
- If residents who are suspected or known to have influenza need to be transferred to hospital or another facility, please make sure to advise the receiving facility.

If you suspect an influenza outbreak in your facility it is important to immediately notify your local public health unit on 1300 066 055. Public health units will be able to assist you with collection of swabs and help implement correct infection control procedures.

Antiviral medications are recommended for people with influenza infections and these should ideally be started within 48 hours of the start of symptoms. Public health units can help you

and your attending doctors with accessing antivirals treatment, and can advise if antiviral prophylaxis for other residents and staff is also recommended.

Here are some additional questions to consider as you prepare for an influenza outbreak:


- Do you have an influenza vaccination program to encourage high rates of vaccinations for your residents?
- Are resident vaccination records updated regularly?
- Do you have an influenza vaccination program for your staff?
- Are staff vaccination records updated regularly?
- Do you have an updated outbreak management plan in place?
- Do you know who to contact in case of an outbreak of influenza in your facility?
- Do your staff understand and carry out correct hand hygiene and infection control practices?
- Do you have a system to ensure that family and friends are notified in case of an outbreak of influenza?

You should have received from NSW Health an influenza package in June of this year. This included is influenza signage and the 10 step process to identifying influenza outbreaks. These are supplied to help facilities promote awareness about respiratory hygiene and assist staff in identifying and what to do during a respiratory/influenza outbreak.

More copies of these resources are available through your public health unit or you can find them at the dedicated NSW Health Influenza website for residential care facilities: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/residential-care.aspx>

For further advice contact your local public health unit on **1300 066 055**.

Yours sincerely



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