

Severe flu epidemic hits country

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New Zealand is facing an influenza epidemic that experts say is as big as swine flu and has already left about 12 people fighting for their lives.

The H3N2 strain of the virus, which causes hallucinations and crippling nausea, is even striking healthy young people.

About 60 flu-stricken people have been admitted to a special isolated ward in Christchurch Hospital, and now public health officials have warned that the virus is spreading north.

Aucklanders Lucy Janisch-Fitzgerald was rushed to hospital on Tuesday night and placed on a ventilator in the intensive care unit, unable to control her breathing.

The 22-year-old was in a serious condition for three days and was only moved out of the ward on Friday.

Speaking from her hospital bed last night, she told the Herald on Sunday she had been knocked sideways by the flu.

"I crashed," she said. "I couldn't breathe on my own, my heart rate was too high. I've been on IV drips for six days now," Janisch-Fitzgerald said.

She is believed to be one of the first in Auckland struck down by the same severe strain of flu that is causing havoc in Christchurch, according to Canterbury Health virologist Lance Jennings.

Canterbury has been the worst hit so far by the "epidemic" of the H3N2 strain, which is expected to be as severe in New Zealand as the H1N1 swine flu that killed 49 people in 2009.

"With H3N2 ... we tend to see more severe outcomes in terms of hospital admissions, admissions to intensive care and death," Jennings said.

Waitemata and Counties Manukau have the highest number of flu sufferers nationwide, but there has yet to be a rise in flu patients hospitalised in those districts.

Tim Jelleyman, acting chief medical officer at Waitemata, said he expected the number of flu cases in the district to increase.

Canterbury medical officer Alistair Humphrey said a special ward had been set up at Christchurch Hospital to cater for up to 60 patients affected by the epidemic at any given moment. About seven patients had been admitted to intensive care, he said.

"It's certainly putting pressure on the whole health system. I work clinically as a GP in a 24-hour surgery ... My shifts have been absolutely full-on every time I'm there. It's putting pressure on GPs, on the emergency departments, on hospitals. Doctors and nurses are starting to get ill."

The epidemic is expected to spread across the country in coming weeks, expedited by the return to school after the winter break.

Vaccination is free until July 31 for pregnant women, people aged 65 or older, and anyone with ongoing medical conditions.

National Influenza Specialist Group spokeswoman Brenda Saunders said almost 960,000 doses of the flu vaccination had been distributed so far this season - 28,000 fewer than the same time last year.

Public Health Surveillance's national report shows a steep increase in flu cases last week, almost double the number at the same time last year.

Humphrey said: "This year we are up [on flu cases] pretty much as high as we were during the swine flu epidemic. It's a serious illness. It's not something that should be ignored."

What is H3N2

- * H3N2 is an A-type virus.
- * It descended from a virus that originated as a pandemic in Hong Kong in 1968.
- * Canterbury Health virologist Dr Lance Jennings says H3N2 circulates through a population until the level of immunity has built up.
- * Symptoms include hallucinations, crippling fevers and nausea.
- * Once there is resilience in the population, H3N2 mutates so that it is more infective.

- APNZ / Herald on Sunday

