

b Influenza - guidance for the upcoming season

The influenza season in South Africa occurs in the winter months, on average beginning in the first week of June. However, there is variation – in past years, the season has started as early as the last week of April or as late as the first week of July. Data from the NICD influenza surveillance programmes (the 'Viral Watch', influenza-like illness (ILI) surveillance at primary healthcare clinics and pneumonia surveillance for severe disease in hospitalised patients) show that during 2015, the predominant circulating influenza subtype was influenza A(H1N1)pdm09, followed by influenza A (H3N2), and influenza B. The season started in week 16 (ending 19 April), peaked in week 23 (ending 7 June) and ended in week 37 (ending 13 September). Vaccination is the most effective strategy to prevent influenza. It is essential that health care practitioners familiarize themselves with influenza vaccination guidelines in preparation for the coming season.

Recommended influenza vaccine formulation for 2016

Influenza vaccine composition is updated frequently because circulating influenza viruses continuously evolve. The following strains have been recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) for the trivalent inactivated influenza vaccine (IIV) 2016 southern hemisphere influenza season:

- an A/California/7/2009 (H1N1)pdm09-like virus
- an A/Hong Kong/4801/2014 (H3N2)-like virus
- a B Brisbane/60/2008-like virus.

These recommendations include a change in the A (H3N2) and B strains when compared with the composition of the trivalent IIV used for the southern hemisphere during the 2015 season.

Timing of influenza vaccination

Vaccination should be administered each year before the influenza season, i.e. from March (or as soon as the vaccine becomes available) to June. Protective antibodies develop by two weeks post-immunization. Vaccination may not be helpful if administered late in the season, although it is still advised for persons at risk of severe influenza.

Healthcare workers are encouraged to discuss influenza vaccination with their patients, especially amongst those who are at increased risk for severe influenza-associated complications.

Groups recommended for influenza vaccination

The following groups of persons are advised to receive influenza vaccine:

- Pregnant women irrespective of stage of pregnancy, or postpartum
- Persons with underlying medical conditions such as chronic pulmonary (including tuberculosis) and cardiac diseases, chronic renal diseases, diabetes mellitus and similar metabolic disorders, individuals who are immunosuppressed and individuals who are morbidly obese (body mass index ≥ 40 kg/m²)
- Persons living with HIV infection
- Healthcare workers
- Residents of chronic care and rehabilitation facilities, including homes for the elderly.
- Persons aged >65 years
- Children aged 6 months - 59 months
- Persons aged 6 months - ≤ 18 years on long-term aspirin therapy
- Adults and children who are family contacts of individuals at high risk of severe influenza
- Any persons wishing to minimise the risk of influenza acquisition, especially in workplace settings where large-scale absenteeism could cause significant economic losses.

Detailed recommendations on target groups, dosages and contraindications for the 2016 influenza season will be published in the March issue of the South African Medical Journal.

Source: Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis, NICD-NHLS (cherylc@nicd.ac.za).