

For Health Professionals

Health Alerts

Health Update #106 - Sentinel Provider Influenza Surveillance Program - October 22, 2004

The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), along with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), is recruiting health care providers to participate in the U.S. Sentinel Physician Influenza Surveillance Network.

Influenza causes substantial morbidity and mortality every winter. Two to four million New Yorkers become infected during a typical epidemic season with approximately 8,000 hospitalizations and 1,000 deaths annually. Because influenza viruses constantly mutate, surveillance is the most important tool in recognition, control, and prevention of illness.

New York influenza surveillance sentinels are part of a 1900-member, nationwide network. Because influenza is not a reportable disease, the CDC seeks weekly reports of influenza-like illness (fever of 100° and cough or sore throat in the absence of a known cause) and 6 patient specimens from volunteering healthcare providers. This information - combined with data from hospitals, nursing homes, and laboratories - is used to monitor the emergence and timing, location, and circulation of influenza viruses each year from October through May.

NY influenza surveillance sentinels (115) saw over 500,000 patients during the 2003 - 2004 influenza season. Weekly percentages of office visits for ILI ranged from 0.5% to almost 5% for the state. Nationally, percentages of ILI in excess of 2.5% correlate with annual epidemic activity.

Influenza surveillance sentinels collect respiratory specimens on up to six patients per season to be sent to the NYSDOH virology lab for typing and sub-typing. Specimen collection kits, shipping, and testing are provided free of charge. Specimens collected early in the season are used to gauge the match between circulating viral strains and those covered by the current vaccine. Specimens collected in the middle and end of influenza season are used by CDC and WHO to help determine viral strains for inclusion in the next year's vaccine.

Physicians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners from all specialties and any practice type are invited to enroll as surveillance sentinels. Weekly reports consist of the number of patients seen with ILI in four broad age categories and the total number of patients seen for the week. The report is submitted to the CDC via the Internet, phone, or fax and takes typically 15 - 30 minutes each week. Materials to collect and ship specimens on six patients are provided at no cost.

Sentinel providers, using the Internet reporting system, can easily access regional and national influenza updates. Weekly updates for New York State are accessible at www.health.state.ny.us. Participants also receive annual subscriptions to Emerging Infectious Diseases and Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Active participation in the sentinel surveillance program satisfies Family Practice residency research requirements.

To receive more information or to enroll in this important public health program please contact Pam Duncan at the New York State Department of Health (518-486-2938), pxd04@health.state.ny.us.