

Higher Virginia flu numbers explained

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Published: January 24, 2009

Virginia is the only state reporting widespread flu, according to a federal map that shows where flu is occurring.

But there might not necessarily be more sniffing and sneezing going on here than in other states. Virginia has switched to a more sensitive method of finding cases of flulike illness.

"I have no reason to think Virginia is experiencing more influenza right now than other states," said C. Diane Woolard, division director for surveillance and investigation at the Virginia Department of Health.

"I think the difference is really in how we collect the data. We have changed how we do flu surveillance in the last couple of years," Woolard said.

The department has gone from a system that required Health Department staff to call specific doctors weekly to ask how many cases of flulike illness they had seen, to a system that automatically receives data from 77 emergency departments and urgent-care centers across the state every night.

"We feel now we have more complete and more timely data, and I think that just translates into having a more sensitive system," Woolard said. "We may need to change our thresholds. Maybe it's too sensitive."

Virginia is one of eight locations in the U.S. to use the more sensitive method.

"I think that more places will eventually go to this," Woolard said. "It's a new method, and some of the methodology needs to still be ironed out."

Flu is considered widespread when outbreaks or increases in flulike illness and laboratory-confirmed flu are reported in more than half the regions of the state.

Richmond-area health-care providers say they are seeing a lot of flulike illness but not lots of true flu. Doctors are able to take a nose or throat swab and confirm in 15 to 30 minutes whether a patient has influenza.

"Every other patient coming in has flulike symptoms," said William H. O'Neal Jr., physician assistant at the Family Health Clinic at Westbury Pharmacy in Henrico County.

"One thing I like to do with anybody that displays symptoms, I will go ahead and do a flu swab just because we are on the lookout for it." O'Neal said he has not had a positive flu test result yet. "But we are still on the cusp of the high season."

Dr. Kenneth Lucas, medical director of the Parham Patient First medical center, also has been swabbing noses and throats looking for the flu, but he has not seen the flurry of patients -- 10 to 15 a day -- that location typically gets when flu is in high swing.

Lucas has an informal way of telling whether a patient has the flu. If the person is not lying down by the time he walks into the examining room, it's usually not the flu.

With the flu, "they say the first three days you think you are dying and the next three days you hope you are dying," said Lucas, a family physician. "It's very debilitating, even for a young, healthy person."

During the 2007-08 flu season, Virginia reported widespread flu outbreaks through late March. Woolard said data coming in show increased flulike illness in central, eastern and northern regions of the state.

"We think it will be another four to eight weeks before we start seeing a decline," Woolard said, adding that it's not too late to get a flu shot.