

PRESS INFORMATION



Stockholm, 8 January 2009

ECDC concludes that vaccination of risk groups and healthcare workers should be further strengthened as seasonal influenza spreads across Europe

Today ECDC issued scientific advice stressing the importance of further strengthening influenza vaccination of people in risk groups and healthcare workers to ensure a high level of protection. Through the European Influenza Surveillance Scheme (EISS), a number of countries in the southern and western parts of the EU are reporting consultation rates for influenza above the levels seen in the last two or more seasons. Most of the viruses identified so far are influenza A(H3N2), the subtype associated with moderately severe influenza last season (2007/8) in North America and in parts the Southern Hemisphere in their winter season in 2008. Further spread of influenza to the north and east seems very likely in the coming weeks. That is why ECDC is now reminding people in risk groups for influenza and healthcare workers to be vaccinated. Guidance issued by ECDC in August 2008 identified older people, along with persons with chronic medical conditions such as chronic respiratory disease, heart disease, renal disease and immune impairment, as being the priority risk groups for influenza. Also in many EU countries health care workers are recommended for immunization.

Professor Johan Giesecke, ECDC's Chief Scientist said:

"Influenza vaccination is important in every winter season and this season is certainly no exception. In fact, early indicators from the first affected countries suggest that this may be the worst influenza season that Europe has seen in the past two or three years. Given these facts, ECDC is emphasising its advice that vaccination of risk groups for influenza, notably older people and those with chronic medical conditions, as well as healthcare workers, is key to mitigating the effects of seasonal influenza".

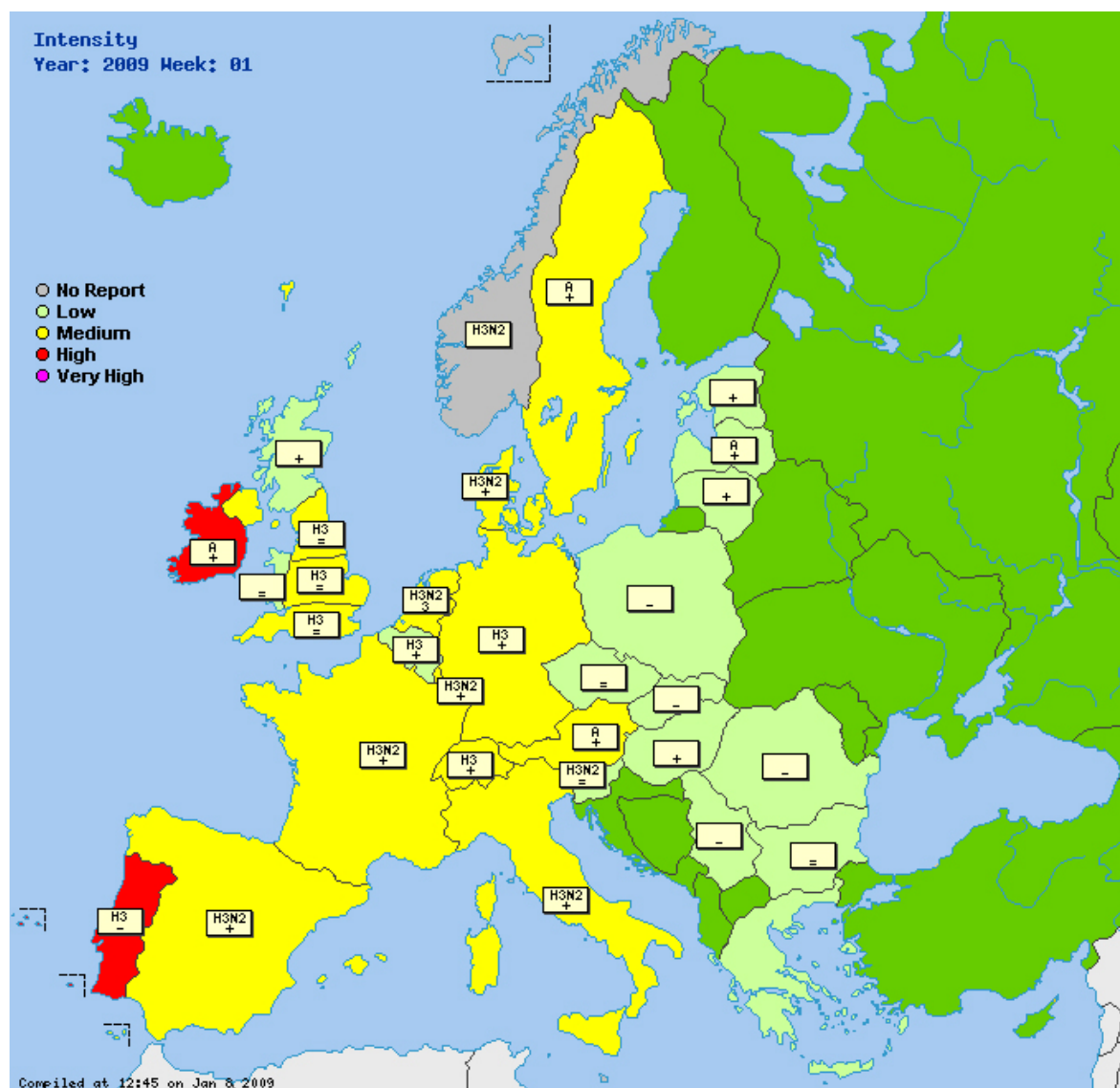
ECDC surveillance of seasonal influenza

Surveillance of seasonal influenza in Europe is based on reporting of influenza viruses detected by laboratories and networks of sentinel doctors (mostly general practitioners) reporting rates of people consulting with influenza like illness (ILI) or acute respiratory infections (ARI). The latter clinical surveillance takes place each winter between week 40 of one year and week 20 of the following year. From a subset of ILI/ARI cases clinical specimens are also collected for virological testing for influenza and some other viruses. This surveillance was developed in Europe as the long-standing European Influenza Surveillance Scheme (EISS), now overseen by ECDC, and is part of the Global Influenza Surveillance Network of WHO.

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Map showing Intensity of Influenza Activity in Europe, European Influenza Surveillance Scheme (EISS), Year: 2009, Week: 1 (29.12.2008 – 04.01.09)



No Report = no report relating to intensity received from this country

Low = no influenza activity or influenza at baseline levels

Medium = usual levels of influenza activity

High = higher than usual levels of influenza activity

Very high = particularly severe levels of influenza activity

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[Note: This map is updated on a weekly basis and can be accessed at:
<http://www.ecdc.europa.eu>]

Notes to editors:

Steps to reduce spread of influenza

- People in high risk groups (older people, people with chronic conditions such as heart disease or lung disease, immune compromised people) should get vaccinated against influenza, if they have not already done so.
- Where possible, people infected with influenza should avoid close contact with others.
- Basic hygiene measures such as hand-washing are also effective in reducing the spread of influenza.
- Other measures include antiviral medications, which can be used according to national protocols to prevent infection or reduce the severity and duration of symptoms.

About Influenza

- Influenza, commonly called the 'flu', is a highly contagious viral illness caused by influenza A and B viruses.
- It is characterised by a sudden symptom onset with patients experiencing a severe cough, headaches, muscle aches and pains, fever/chills and fatigue/weakness.
- Each year influenza affects, on average, between 5% and 15% of the population.
- Influenza can occur as a pandemic, usually every 10-50 years in which a new strain of the influenza A virus causes simultaneous deaths worldwide.

Further information:

A technical statement accompanying this Press Release is available at
<http://www.ecdc.europa.eu>

Risk groups it should be noted that Risk Groups are defined by ECDC as persons who are more likely than average to experience severe illness should they fall ill and for whom vaccination reduces that risk. ECDC Guidance on Priority Risk Groups for Influenza Vaccination in Europe can be found [here](#) and in an article in the peer-reviewed journal [Eurosurveillance](#).

Individual EU countries differ in the precise groups they identify as risk groups and recommend for immunisation. These recommendations are detailed country by country in a recent survey by the [EU VENICE Project](#) and as an article in [Eurosurveillance](#) ([or in PDF](#))

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[Information about ECDC influenza activities](#)

[ECDC Fact Sheets on influenza vaccines](#)

[Information about the European Influenza Surveillance Scheme \(EISS\)](#)

[Information about WHO influenza activities](#)

[Information about the Global Influenza Surveillance Scheme of WHO](#)

[Information about WHO Regional Office Europe](#)

Sarah Earnshaw, Media Officer, Tel: +46.761.251567

Email: press@ecdc.europa.eu