

# PRESS INFORMATION



Stockholm, 9 October 2008

## **Start of “influenza season”: severity of this winter’s epidemic not yet clear but ECDC supports vaccination of risk groups**

*As health authorities across Europe start their annual campaigns to immunise people against seasonal influenza the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), has highlighted the benefits of older people getting vaccinated – but refused to make predictions on the severity of this year’s influenza season. ECDC stated that there is no reason to believe the influenza season this winter will be any more, or any less, severe than last winter. Seasonal influenza needs to be taken seriously every year, and it is important that people with a higher risk of becoming seriously ill protect themselves by getting vaccinated. Figures published today in the journal Eurosurveillance show significant differences in the percentage of elderly people vaccinated against influenza each year in different EU countries. Several countries are on course to meet, or even exceed, the World Health Organization target of vaccinating 75% of people aged 65 or over by 2010. However, in many other countries vaccine coverage among the elderly is well below the target level.*

Zsuzsanna Jakab, Director of ECDC said

*“We do not know how severe an influenza season we will have in Europe this winter, but it’s always a good idea if people in high risk groups get vaccinated. Older people, and people with chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes can become very ill with influenza, whichever strain of the virus they catch.”*

In a parallel development, a network of doctors and laboratories across Europe is gearing up to monitor this year’s influenza season. The laboratories will provide weekly updates on the number of influenza viruses they have found, while the doctors in the network will report the number of patients they see each week who have influenza like illnesses. This Europe-wide surveillance of influenza has been happening each winter since 1996 and has been coordinated by the EU funded European Influenza Surveillance Scheme. From this winter onward, influenza surveillance is being coordinated by ECDC.

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## Defining risk groups for influenza vaccination

Guidance issued by ECDC in August this year identified the elderly as being the priority risk group for vaccination against influenza, along with persons with chronic medical conditions such as chronic respiratory disease, chronic heart disease, chronic renal disease and immune impaired people.

There is no standard EU definition of who qualifies as an elderly person for the purposes of influenza vaccination. Most countries recommend influenza vaccination for people aged 65 and over, but a few recommend vaccination for people aged 60 and over, or even 50 and over.

- The data published today by ECDC on vaccination rates among the elderly uses a definition of people aged 65 and over. The data is based on a survey conducted by the European vaccination policy network VENICE and additional data supplied by data from ECDC.

## Further information:

ECDC Guidance on Priority Risk Groups for Influenza Vaccination:

[http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/files/pdf/Publications/priority\\_risk\\_groups\\_forinfluenza\\_vaccination.pdf](http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/files/pdf/Publications/priority_risk_groups_forinfluenza_vaccination.pdf)

Eurosurveillance article on vaccination coverage among the elderly in Europe

<http://www.eurosurveillance.org>

ECDC influenza activities

[http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/Health\\_topics/influenza/](http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/Health_topics/influenza/)

European Influenza Surveillance Scheme website

<http://www.eiss.org>

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