

MEDIA RELEASE

12 July 2009

Pacific people must take extra care with swine flu

The latest figures released by the Ministry of Health show a higher number of Pacific people in the numbers of confirmed cases of the Influenza A (H1N1) 09, (swine flu).

Dr Api Talemaitoga the Ministry of Health's chief advisor on Pacific Health and the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs chief executive Dr Colin Tukuitonga say "this looks worrying, although in part this is due to people having become infected while overseas and then the influenza spreading within their local community".

"Nonetheless I urge Pacific people to take extra care and exercise good basic health habits to prevent spreading this flu virus," Dr Tukuitonga said. "We are a very social people with large families and we like getting together a lot, but now we must act responsibly and sensibly to prevent the rate of infection from escalating further."

Dr Talemaitoga said figures show, of the 642 total confirmed cases by June 28 there were 144 Pacific people infected with the Influenza A (H1N1) 09 virus. Canterbury was the worst hit with 63 cases.

He is also advising pregnant women, parents of young children and those with underlying health problems such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), severe asthma, heart disease etcetera to seek medical help if they contract the flu, or if their influenza results in problems with breathing, chest pain or unusual drowsiness.

"Pacific people who have other health issues should not hesitate to phone Healthline or their GP service, for advice" Dr Talemaitoga said. "If they have health problems like respiratory conditions, heart disease and get influenza, they are able to receive tamiflu for free if their doctor assesses them as needing it"

Dr Talemaitoga is also urging his health colleagues to be proactive in asking Pacific patients about their co-morbidities as they may not necessarily volunteer this information, especially if seeing a particular Pacific person for the first time at one of the community influenza clinics.

Meanwhile, Dr Tukuitonga said as a further precaution Pacific people should take advantage of the Government's offer of free seasonal flu vaccines.

Signs and symptoms of influenza include fever, cough, sore throat, stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Some people also experience diarrhoea and vomiting. Dr Tukuitonga said safety measures which all health authorities are recommending include:

- **Stay home** if you are sick, rather than going to school or work.
- If you become sick **stay home for seven days** after your symptoms begin or until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours, whichever is longer
- **Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.**
- **Phone your doctor** or **Healthline 0800 611 116** if you or someone in your family gets sick, or is already sick and gets worse.
- **Do not turn up at a hospital or medical centre before phoning** for advice, as you can spread germs to other people.
- If you are caring for someone with the flu, watch for signs that they may need further medical attention.
- **Be prepared.** Have enough food water and basic medical supplies including paracetamol or ibuprofen, as well as any medicine you take regularly, nappies for babies, cleaning products, tissues and bathroom supplies for at least a week.
- **Hand hygiene** is still the single most effective measure in protecting yourself. Wash your hands with soap and water and dry them thoroughly.
- Alcohol-based cleaners are also effective. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth as germs spread this way.

“For most healthy people the swine flu seems to be a mild to moderate illness which is unpleasant rather than life-threatening, Dr Tukuitonga said.

“However, the rising number of recent deaths in the early part of July shows just how serious this can be and we must all be extra vigilant and careful with our health.”

ENDS

For more information contact:

Dr Colin Tukuitonga – 027 2229713

Dr Api Talemaitoga – 021 2208269

Sri Krishnamurthi

Senior Communications Advisor

Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs

Tel: 04 4950025 / 021 2423419.