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Cruise ship passengers reminded to receive flu vaccine

Public health officials are warning anyone planning to take a cruise to make sure they get vaccinated against flu before embarking on their journey after recent influenza outbreaks among cruise ship passengers.

The Sydney Cruise Ship Health Surveillance Program has picked up more than 360 cases of influenza-like illness among passengers on 21 cruises arriving in the Port of Sydney since 1 February. In a small number of cases the patient required hospital treatment.

Despite winter still being months away, many of these cases have been caused by influenza A.

Professor Mark Ferson, Director of South Eastern Sydney Local Health District's Public Health Unit, which runs the Cruise Ship Health Surveillance Program, said: "We strongly recommend that people who are planning to take a cruise see their doctor at least two weeks before departure, and ask for the influenza vaccine.

"This is especially important for pregnant women, the elderly and anyone who is at increased risk of pneumonia or other serious complications if they contract influenza.

"Cruise ships often hold large numbers of passengers in close quarters, and infectious diseases can spread easily once introduced onto the ship."

Passengers should take the following measures to reduce the chance of introducing and spreading diseases on board:

- Do not travel if you are unwell;
- If you get sick on the cruise see the doctor and follow medical advice;
- Cover your coughs and sneezes, and dispose of used tissues carefully;
- Clean your hands regularly, even if you are well, with soap and water;
- In addition, frequently use your own alcohol-based hand rub or the dispensers provided on the ship;
- If you get sick, try to keep at least one metre distance from others.

Cruise ships have strong protocols for assessing, treating and isolating passengers and crew with suspected influenza.

This season's influenza vaccine is now available in the private market and publicly funded vaccine will be available from GPs next month.

For more information on the Public Health Unit's Cruise Ship Health Surveillance Program, visit http://www.seslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/Public_Health/CruiseShipProgram/surv.asp

For more information on influenza outbreaks in travel groups, visit http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/Influenza_outbreaks_in_travel_groups.aspx