

VI Health Officials Urge Flu Precautions as Puerto Rico Reports Surge and Deaths

The V.I. Department of Health is warning residents to take preventive action amid a sharp rise in influenza cases and fatalities in Puerto Rico, citing frequent inter-island travel and urging vaccination, early care, and staying home when sick.

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The V.I. Department of Health is urging residents to take immediate steps to protect themselves and their families as influenza activity continues to rise sharply in neighboring Puerto Rico, where a public health emergency remains in effect.

Health officials said that while influenza levels in the territory have not yet exceeded last year's numbers, frequent travel between the islands increases the risk of transmission, making early

prevention essential.

“What we are seeing in Puerto Rico is a sobering reminder that influenza is not a mild illness, it can be deadly, especially for those who are unvaccinated,” said Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion. “Our Epidemiology wastewater surveillance system does not currently indicate an increase in cases in the Territory in comparison to our numbers from last year. However, we recognize that frequent travel between our islands makes transmission easy. That is why we are urging residents to take preventive steps now.”

On January 27, Puerto Rico declared a State of Emergency for influenza following a sharp and sustained surge in cases. The declaration remains in effect. To date, Puerto Rico has reported more than 42,000 confirmed influenza cases, over 3,000 hospitalizations, and 128 influenza-associated deaths. Nearly 46 percent of reported cases there involve children.

Puerto Rico health officials have also reported that 96.1 percent of individuals who died were unvaccinated, underscoring the role of vaccination in preventing severe illness and death. Hospitalizations have been concentrated among children, older adults, and individuals with underlying chronic conditions, placing significant strain on Puerto Rico’s healthcare system.

“What we are seeing in Puerto Rico reinforces what public health professionals have been touting all along: the flu vaccine saves lives,” said Dr. Tai Hunte-Caesar, Chief Medical Officer for the Virgin Islands Department of Health. “We strongly encourage Virgin Islands residents who have not yet received their flu shot to speak with their healthcare provider as soon as possible. Influenza is often underestimated, but like COVID-19, it can lead to severe illness, hospitalization, and, in some cases, death.”

To reduce barriers to care, the Department of Health’s Community Health Clinic is offering the flu vaccine at no cost to uninsured and underinsured residents. Appointments may be scheduled by calling 340-712-0131 on St. Croix, 340-774-7477 on St. Thomas, or 340-776-6400 on St. John.

Health officials are also urging residents to recognize flu symptoms and seek care when necessary. Influenza symptoms often appear suddenly and may include fever or chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, fatigue, and in some cases vomiting or diarrhea. Most individuals with mild illness can recover at home with rest, fluids, and over-the-counter medications.

Emergency medical care should be sought if symptoms include difficulty breathing, chest pain, confusion, severe or persistent vomiting, or if symptoms improve and then return with worsening fever or cough. Parents are advised to seek immediate care for children who show trouble breathing, bluish lips or face, signs of dehydration, high fever, or worsening symptoms.

The Department of Health is also strongly advising residents to stay home when sick. Individuals experiencing flu-like symptoms should avoid work, school, childcare, and public activities until fully recovered and fever-free for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medication. Children who are ill should remain home from school to protect classmates, teachers, and staff and to help prevent further spread of influenza in the community.

Flu vaccination is particularly important for older adults, young children, pregnant women, and individuals with chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, or weakened immune systems.

“While vaccination remains the most effective way to prevent severe illness from the Flu, we also encourage residents, especially those who are immunocompromised or at higher risk, to consider wearing a mask in public settings as an added layer of protection,” Commissioner Encarnacion said. “Simple steps like staying home when sick, practicing good hand hygiene, and masking when appropriate can significantly reduce the spread of flu and help protect our most vulnerable community members.”

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