GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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STATEMENT BY CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER DR. RONALD GEORGES INCREASE IN RESPIRATORY ILLNESSESS IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

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As Chief Medical Officer, I wish to bring the public’s attention to the increase in respiratory illnesses currently being experienced across the Territory. Of particular concern is the occurrence of severe illness among children, some of whom have required hospitalisation.

Over the past three weeks, our Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit has recorded a steady increase in respiratory illnesses, with reported cases reaching 22 in a single week, exceeding our surveillance threshold. Laboratory investigations have identified influenza A and influenza B as the predominant respiratory viruses circulating in the Territory.

While increases in respiratory illnesses are not uncommon at this time of year, the peak tourism season, increased travel, family gatherings and holiday celebrations create greater opportunities for these viruses to spread within our community.

I am therefore urging residents to remain vigilant and take the necessary precautions to protect themselves, their families and those most vulnerable to severe illness.

Recognising the signs and symptoms

Influenza can cause mild to severe illness and, in some instances, result in serious complications, hospitalisation or death.

Symptoms typically develop suddenly, within one to four days of infection, and may include fever or chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches and fatigue. Vomiting and diarrhea may also occur, particularly among children. It is important to note that not everyone with influenza will develop a fever.

Protecting yourself and others

I encourage everyone to adopt the following preventive measures:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser when soap and water are unavailable.

- Wear a well-fitting face mask when experiencing respiratory symptoms, particularly when around others.
- Wear a face mask when visiting healthcare facilities, whether or not you are experiencing symptoms.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your upper sleeve when coughing or sneezing. Dispose of used tissues promptly and wash or sanitise your hands afterwards.
- Replace your face mask if it becomes damp or soiled.
- Stay at home when ill and avoid close contact with others.
- Keep indoor spaces well ventilated by opening windows and doors where practical.

Protecting those most at risk

While anyone can develop complications from influenza, children under five years of age, particularly those under two, adults aged 65 and older, pregnant women, persons with weakened immune systems and those living with chronic conditions such as asthma, diabetes and heart disease are at greater risk of severe illness.

I strongly encourage persons within these groups to take additional precautions, including wearing a well-fitting face mask in crowded or poorly ventilated settings and limiting close contact with persons experiencing respiratory symptoms.

Influenza vaccination

I also encourage residents, particularly those at increased risk of severe illness, to speak with their healthcare provider about receiving the seasonal influenza vaccine.

Vaccination remains one of the most effective ways of reducing the risk of severe influenza-related illness, complications and hospitalisation.

Special appeal to parents and caregivers

Given the occurrence of severe respiratory illness among children, I want to make a special appeal to parents and caregivers to closely monitor their children and

seek medical attention if their condition worsens.

Immediate medical attention should be sought if a child experiences:

- Difficulty breathing or unusually fast breathing;
- Bluish lips or face;
- Signs of dehydration, including reduced urination;
- Unusual drowsiness, reduced alertness or difficulty waking;
- Seizures
- Fever or cough that improves but subsequently returns or worsens; or
- Any other severe or concerning symptoms.

I also urge parents to keep children at home when they are ill. This supports their recovery and helps reduce the spread of infection within schools and childcare facilities.

Our Epidemiology and Surveillance Unit will continue to monitor respiratory illness activity across the Territory, and we will provide updates as necessary.

As we enter this festive period, I remind everyone that protecting the health of our community is a shared responsibility. The simple precautions we take each day can make a significant difference in reducing the spread of respiratory illnesses and protecting those most vulnerable to severe disease.

Let us remain vigilant, act responsibly and do our part to keep ourselves, our families and our community healthy.

For Additional Information Contact:

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