

LIFE & STYLE

Deadly swine flu will return says expert

MICHAEL FOX Last updated 14:42 01/06/2011

Swine flu will return this year to "mop up" those who previously escaped infection, a leading flu expert says.

More people will be hospitalised and some may die as a result of influenza viruses, with "substantial outbreaks" of several flu strains expected in retirement homes and schools.

But flu rates are currently lower than previous years.

Canterbury District Health Board virologist Lance Jennings said although it would be less prevalent, the potentially deadly swine flu would return would return to New Zealand this season.

"Sadly, we will see some people admitted to hospital and possibly die from this virus again," he said.

Fifteen people died from swine flu in New Zealand last year.

He predicted at least three viruses would be circulating this year, including H1N1, or swine flu, H3N2 and influenza B.

All six flu cases confirmed last week proved to be the influenza B virus, he said.

As some of those viruses had not been in circulation in recent years, there would be "substantial outbreaks" in retirement homes and schools.

"We have seen that influenza viruses do have a devastating effect on some people," he said.

But Dr Jennings said flu rates were currently lower than previous years while vaccination rates were relatively high.

"At the present time it's very quiet."

Globally, swine flu levels were diminishing though some northern hemisphere areas such as the UK had been "quite severely affected". There had been several deaths, he said.

Last year the flu spike did not hit until late June, carrying on until August and tapering off in September, he said.

This year, the warm weather was keeping rates of infection down, he said.

When cold snaps arrive, people were forced indoors and into unventilated rooms and the virus was passed more easily from person to person.

The best protection was vaccination and about 18 per cent had taken that up so far this year which was more than this time last year, he said.

The vaccination programme runs until the end of July.

It is free for high-risk groups such as pregnant woman and those over the age of 65. Others can get it through their GP.

There was also a **campaign in schools to encourage "safe-sneezing"** to help limit the spread of germs.



- Stuff