

# Flu picture up in air

Signs of milder season, but that is 'just a guess'

BY DELTHIA RICKS  
delthia.ricks@newsday.com

With memories still fresh of last year's ferocious flu season in which 80,000 Americans died of influenza and its complications — the highest flu death toll in 40 years — it's still too early to forecast how the new influenza season will play out, medical experts say.

"Preliminary findings suggest this might be a milder season, based on what we're seeing in the Southern Hemisphere, but I caution that this is just a guess," said Dr. Aaron Glatt, chairman of medicine at South Nassau Communities Hospital in Oceanside and a specialist in infectious diseases.

He and other experts underscored that the only predictable thing about influenza is its enduring unpredictability.

The infection can be prevented through vaccination, or at least rendered less debilitating — and its duration shortened — should infection occur despite getting a shot, Glatt said.

Flu activity begins ramping up in this region of the globe — the Northern Hemisphere — around now and runs through spring. The Southern Hemisphere's influenza season runs from June through October.

The globe's southern sector often serves as a bellwether of what might occur in this part of the world. Last year, a deadly flu season in Australia — one of the worst on record — served as a harbinger of what was soon to unfold in the United States and elsewhere north of the equator.

"Keep in mind 80,000 people died in the last flu season [in the United States] and that includes 200 children," said Glatt, a spokesman for the Infectious Diseases Society of America.

## No child deaths on LI

The extraordinarily high death toll was revealed last week by the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Robert Redfield, during an interview with



LAST FLU SEASON  
DEATH TOLL

80,000

■ 200 children

■ Previous years'  
average range:  
12,000 to 56,000

JOHNNY MILANO

A pharmacist administers a flu shot at Molloy College in February. Health experts are urging Long Islanders to get vaccinated this year.

“At the risk of sounding like a broken record, my message is this: Get vaccinated.”

— Dr. Aaron Glatt, chairman of medicine at South Nassau Communities Hospital in Oceanside

The Associated Press.

State health officials recorded six pediatric deaths in New York, none on Long Island, during the 2017-18 sweep of influenza. The season was so aggressive that flu activity was being reported well into the latter weeks of May, state health statistics show.

Glatt said a death toll of 80,000 is a shocking figure for an infectious disease that is preventable by vaccine. The flu's usual death toll is in the range of 12,000 to 56,000 in a single season, he said.

“At the risk of sounding like a broken record, my message is

this: Get vaccinated,” Glatt added.

Experts attributed the higher-than-usual mortality to the aggressiveness of an A-strain of the virus in circulation last season. H3N2, a dominant strain that circulates annually, rapidly varies its surface proteins from one season to the next. Last year, it was especially nasty.

Howard Jacobson, board chairman of the Long Island Pharmacists Society, said with a new flu season on the cusp of starting, it is important for people to know that ample vaccine is available.

As the owner of three Long Island pharmacies, Jacobson conducts vaccination clinics as a public health service to help stem flu infection on the Island.

“Day before yesterday we did a flu clinic at the West Hempstead Library,” said Jacobson, who owns Rockville Centre Pharmacy, Ryan Medical Pharmacy in Rockville Centre and West Hempstead Pharmacy. “Only two people had signed up in advance but 30 showed up to be vaccinated. Luckily we had plenty of vaccine.”

## Few shortages reported

Jacobson said there have been reports of spot shortages of the high-dose vaccine for people 65 and older at a few chain pharmacies, but the vast majority of outlets on the Island are well stocked.

Dr. Gary Leonardi, a virologist at Nassau University Medical Center in East Meadow, said he has seen no evidence so far that

flu transmission has begun on Long Island. As the chief virologist at a major hospital that receives scores of patients' samples to test for respiratory viruses, Leonardi said none has tested positive in his lab for the seasonal illness.

“People are starting to come into the hospital with respiratory symptoms and in recent weeks we have been doing about eight to 10 rapid flu tests a week,” Leonardi said. “But we aren't finding any flu at this point.”

He said tests have been positive for rhinoviruses, pathogens that cause the common cold, and parainfluenza virus, a respiratory infectious agent that is unrelated to the flu despite its name.

Parainfluenza virus, rhinoviruses, and respiratory syncytial virus, among others, are what he calls fellow travelers, a slew of respiratory viruses that, like influenza, are common from autumn through spring.