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Doctors battle new flu complications

By Daniel Yee
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — Doctors this year have been surprised and overwhelmed by the number of children with severe flu complications, and the nation's health agency plans to monitor them.

Of particular concern is the rise of a drug-resistant staph infection that is complicating efforts to treat them, an official with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Tim Uyeke, epidemiologist with the influenza branch of CDC, said Monday that some children have died from the staph infections — a phenomenon the CDC has not seen before.

Flu complications for children have always been dire: pneumonia, kidney and heart failure, possible brain damage.

"We've just never seen them in the proportions we've seen them this year," said Dr. Steve Schexnayder, chief of pediatric critical care at Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock.

From Texas to California, children's hospitals have been swamped with sick children — many of them desperately ill.

The waiting room at Children's Hospital Central California in Madera was standing room only during the Thanksgiving holiday. Hospital officials called the crowding an epidemic for that facility and said nearly every child tested positive for the flu.

Children's Medical Center in Dallas has seen more than 500 kids with the flu since October. One day last week, two dozen more appeared, most with enough lung disease to be put on ventilators, said Dr. Jane Siegel.

Colorado Springs hospitals have discouraged other kids from coming to the hospital in fear they will catch the virus. In that state six children have died of the flu.

Doctors say some children are coming into hospitals with so much damage they are put on heart-lung bypass machines just to stay alive.

Others face additional problems: Nine-year-old Nick Collins needed four chest tubes to drain fluid from three holes in his lungs caused by bacterial pneumonia. Doctors are trying to pre-

vent a blood clot from killing him.

He has also developed methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), which led to his severe pneumonia.

Nick, a healthy boy until he got the flu in early November, doing better, having been removed from a ventilator on Friday. But he'll likely have to stay in the hospital through the end of the year, his mother says.

"It's scary to find that something as common as the flu can cause something this major every year," said his mother, Kim Collins of Texarkana, Texas. "We sit around for days in awe of the fact the flu has caused all of this."

"It's scary to find that something as common as the flu can cause something this major every year."

— Kim Collins
mother of flu victim

Flu and its complications are the sixth leading cause of death nationally among children age 4 and younger, according to the CDC.

Anecdotally, this flu season seems to be worse for children. But because the CDC doesn't keep track of flu deaths, it's unclear how much worse. The agency is planning to collect data to figure it out, said Dr. Keiji Fukuda, chief of epidemiology in the CDC's influenza branch.

In addition, some connected with the CDC think there may be a push to add school-age children to the list of those most strongly urged to get the shot — the best protection against the virus. The current recommendation for children covers them from 6 months to 2 years and those who have certain chronic conditions.

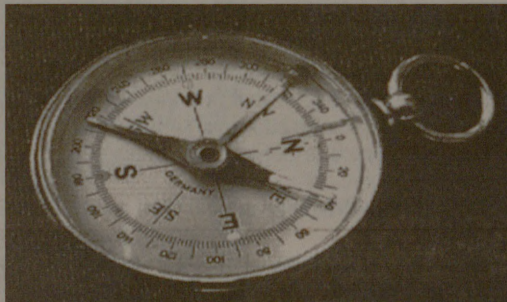
"My own prediction is what you'll continue to see is a broadening of the recommendation for influenza immunization," said Greg Poland, a Mayo Clinic professor and a member of the CDC advisory committee on immunization. "It only makes sense."

Pregnant women — urged to get the flu shot if they are in the second or third trimester — have also become a concern this year.

The CDC is looking closely at some cases in which pregnant women have displayed high pulse rates — which could be a symptom of a dangerous, and potentially fatal, inflammation of the heart, said Dr. William Schaffner, a flu expert with Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Texas in particular has reported several such cases.

In North Carolina health officials made it a point last month to single out both pregnant women and children up to age 9 in groups that should get the vaccine.

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