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MEDIA RELEASE

The winter rainy season isn't good news for all Australians, warns The Australian Lung Foundation

Nearly 60 percent¹ of Australians at-risk of experiencing influenza complications have not yet been protected this winter

30 May 2007...While many Australians are welcoming significant rainfall which heralds the beginning of winter, The Australian Lung Foundation warns that many others face significant illness or even death if they are not adequately prepared for winter. The call coincides with the release of new survey results indicating many Australians, including those with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), are still not protected against influenza¹ – a serious illness which can result in flare-ups or exacerbations, and even death.²

“One of the toughest times of the year for COPD patients is winter time. While COPD patients already experience day-to-day breathlessness where the simplest task is made difficult by limited lung capacity, the colder conditions can really take their breath away”, said Professor Peter Frith, Chair of The Australian Lung Foundation's COPD Executive and Head of Respiratory Services at the Flinders Medical Centre and Repatriation General Hospital, in South Australia.

Winter is a time when exacerbations are about 50 percent more likely to occur in people with COPD, causing increased pressures on hospital beds and a greater burden on health services.² These exacerbations are generally associated with the improved survival of respiratory viruses in outdoor colder weather, the crowding together of people indoors during winter and a likely reduced immunological response.²

Similarly, the risk of heart attack has also been shown to increase during winter as recently published research shows influenza can act as a trigger for acute coronary events – increasing the risk of heart attack by a third.³

Furthermore, a new report by The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) which examines avoidable hospitalisations shows that of the high proportion of chronic condition admissions, COPD is the second most preventable cause of hospitalisation after diabetes, and that influenza and pneumonia are the main admission cause for vaccine-preventable conditions.⁴

Others at risk from winter illnesses such as influenza include those aged 65 or over, people with a weakened immune system and people with underlying medical conditions including diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, and respiratory or lung disease.⁵ The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends influenza vaccination to these groups.⁵

The Australian Lung Foundation encourages people to protect themselves against winter illnesses, and recommends that they:

- Ensure all vaccinations, such as influenza and pneumococcal, are up to date
- Stay away from smoky environments
- Have sufficient heating indoors and that they dress warmly when going outdoors
- And importantly, if they have an ongoing 'winter cough', to see their doctor as it could be a more serious problem

Unfortunately, results from a recent survey¹ released today show that GPs estimate that more than half (58 percent) of people aged under 65 years who are at risk of complications from influenza, including those with COPD, have not been vaccinated against the respiratory illness in 2007.

“Winter presents many problems for people with underlying medical conditions. Exacerbation of symptoms, which can be caused by influenza, means people have a poorer health-related quality of life often resulting in them retreating indoors and feeling more isolated and alone,” said Professor Frith.

“People with lung disease such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease including emphysema and chronic bronchitis, have more frequent attacks and usually experience a 'winter cough' which if left untreated can develop into a more serious condition, such as pneumonia,” he added.

“For this reason, protection against serious winter respiratory illnesses, like influenza, is crucial. It is important that people with underlying medical conditions speak with their doctor about vaccination now to ensure a more comfortable winter season as vaccination against influenza gives people a weapon against falling seriously ill over the next three-four months,” concluded Frith.

A long term disease, COPD is Australia's fifth⁶ biggest killer and the third⁷ leading cause of disease burden after heart disease and stroke.

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