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Rough flu season cuts wide swath through Mass.

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By **Matt Rocheleau**
 GLOBE STAFF MAY 05, 2015

The influenza virus cut a wide swath across Massachusetts in recent months, striking at nearly three times the rate of last year and exacting a particularly harsh toll on older patients, according to public health data. Disease trackers said they believe it may have something to do with a flu vaccine that turned out to be a poor match for the virus in circulation, leaving even those who were immunized vulnerable to the illness.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that this year's shot reduced the risk of getting the flu by just 23 percent. In years when the vaccine is a better match with the circulating virus, the protection provided by a shot can be twice as great.

Massachusetts has seen about 32,560 laboratory-confirmed cases of influenza this season, compared to about 11,185 at this time a year ago, according to the state Department of Public Health. But those cases probably represent just a small fraction of the total number of people infected with the flu.

Many people simply suffer the symptoms without seeing a doctor, or, even if they do see a physician, don't have a laboratory test to confirm the infection.

While this season has been worse than average, it fit within historic norms for Massachusetts, according to Dr. Larry Madoff, director of the state health department's Division of Epidemiology and Immunization.

Madoff said influenza viruses were more widespread in the state two seasons ago, and the situation was even worse in 2009, during the height of the swine flu pandemic.

Dr. Anita Barry, infectious disease bureau director at the [Boston Public Health Commission](#), said that an increase in reported cases may not necessarily mean more people are sick. "It could mean that more people sought medical care and got tested," Barry said.

The ineffectiveness of the vaccine this year appears to have had significant consequences for people 65 and older, who are visiting US hospitals because of the virus at the highest rate on record.

"We've never seen anything like it," said Lyn Finelli, a flu specialist at the CDC in Atlanta. As of the week ending April 25, there were about 317 flu-related hospitalizations for every 100,000 people age 65 and older in the United States — the highest rate since the CDC began tracking those hospitalizations in the 2005-2006 season.

The previous record nationally was 183 hospitalizations per 100,000 people 65 and older, set in the 2012-13 season — a particularly bad flu season.

In Massachusetts, patients 65 and older accounted for more than two-thirds of all flu-related hospitalizations this season, according to data collected by the state health department.

Older patients, who often have underlying health problems, are more likely to suffer complications from the flu, including death, specialists said.

"The natural tendency is this virus tends to hit harder on the elderly," Madoff said. "When the vaccine isn't as effective, that tends to unfortunately have its impact on the elderly."

That's because people over age 65 are more likely to be vaccinated than other age groups, Madoff said, reflecting longstanding recommendations that older people be vaccinated. "It's almost a tradition of vaccinating the elderly against influenza," he said.

Each year, months before the start of the flu season in the United States, health authorities examine which strains are circulating elsewhere in the world and make their best judgment about the types of flu likely to strike.

Only in recent years have health authorities advised that virtually everyone 6 months and older get a shot of protection against a virus implicated in the deaths of thousands of people annually.

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