

Flu epidemic ravages East Asia

Many East Asian countries and territories are recording the most severe seasonal flu outbreak in years, causing hospitals to be overwhelmed and medicine to be scarce.

Japan is grappling with its worst flu outbreak in decades, with infections hitting a record high since 1999. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare reported about 317,000 positive cases at 5,000 medical facilities across the country in just one week. That equates to an average of 64.39 patients per facility, more than double the warning threshold of 30. The cumulative number of flu cases in Japan since September 2, 2024 (the start of the annual flu season) is now more than 6 million.

Experts believe the increase in flu cases is due to people traveling more during the holiday season, and restrictions during the Covid-19 period have reduced their exposure to common pathogens, which could be another reason why communities are more vulnerable to the virus.

Pressure on health care facilities has been exacerbated by shortages of key antiviral drugs such as Tamiflu. Many pharmaceutical companies have struggled to meet the increased demand. Some suppliers have announced temporary suspensions of distribution, with supplies expected to resume by the end of February.

The flu epidemic has received increased attention following the death of Barbie Hsu, a Taiwanese actress who died of influenza-related pneumonia. Her death has raised concerns about the unpredictability of the seemingly mild illness, especially for those with underlying health conditions.

Japanese health officials continue to urge people to get vaccinated, warning that different strains of flu can still spread. Travelers are advised to take precautions such as wearing masks and monitoring their health.

Since early January, **South Korea** has reported its largest flu outbreak since 2016. Cases have surged, especially among young people. According to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA), the suspected flu rate was 73.9 per 1,000 visits at 300 clinics. That marked a 136% jump from 31.3 per 1,000 visits at the end of last year. The rate is approaching its peak of 86.2 in 2016. During the pandemic years, the numbers were 3.3 and 4.8, respectively.

Adolescents, aged 13 to 18, are the group most affected (151.3 cases per 1,000 people), 17.6 times higher than in 2024.

By early February, the number of cases had dropped, but remained significantly above the safety threshold. The most common strains circulating were influenza A (H1N1, H3N2) and influenza B. Officials had not detected any new mutations that would affect the pathogen's ability to spread.

The KDCA stressed that current vaccines are highly effective against circulating viruses. It called on at-risk groups to get vaccinated immediately to prevent the disease.



People wearing face masks while waiting for a train in Japan. Photo: Adobe Stock

Demand for flu shots in **Taiwan** has also skyrocketed. About 73,000 doses of government-sponsored vaccines have been distributed since the news of Hsu's death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). An average of 24,700 shots were administered each day from January 1 to January 20.

CDC Deputy Director-General Tseng Shu-huai said that as of early February, the region had only 90,000 doses of flu vaccine left. Manufacturers across Taiwan are racing to ensure that stocks are distributed to medical facilities and vaccination centers in time.

Chang Feng-ye, president of the Taiwan Society of Infectious Diseases, said flu outbreaks usually peak early in the year. At that point, most people have already been vaccinated. But Hsu's death has raised awareness, prompting those who have not yet received the vaccine to get vaccinated.

Meanwhile, major hospitals in Taiwan are overloaded after Tet, with emergency beds exceeding 300%, putting great pressure on doctors and nurses.

In Tainan, major hospitals are facing serious overload in their emergency departments after the Lunar New Year holiday. Hospital leaders revealed that at least five facilities recorded over-capacity of 150%. Some hospitals even reached 300%, causing terrible pressure on the health system.

A doctor explained that 200% overload means that the hospital has 50 beds, but 100 patients need to use them. Thus, many patients need treatment but there are no empty beds. This shortage not only puts pressure on patients, it also makes doctors and nurses vulnerable to psychological trauma, even choosing to leave the emergency department.

Flu cases in **Hong Kong** continue to rise as students and workers return to work after the holiday. Dr Edwin Tsui Lok-kin, head of the Centre for Health Protection, said this year's flu season could last until April.

"Many Hong Kong people travel abroad. So after returning home, they may bring the disease back with them, creating sporadic outbreaks in schools or workplaces," he said.

Last year's flu season lasted 28 weeks due to a shift from the H3 influenza A strain to the H1 strain. According to Dr. Tsui, most flu cases today are still the H1 strain, accounting for about 90%. The virus has not changed much.

Currently, seasonal flu in **Vietnam** is also on the rise with the appearance of influenza A (H1N1, H3N2) and influenza B strains, with no unusual strains. Many people are hospitalized with more severe symptoms than usual, especially children, the elderly and those with underlying diseases. The Ministry of Health recommends that people get vaccinated, wear masks and improve personal hygiene to prevent the spread. There is a temporary shortage of antiviral drugs in some localities, but supplies are being replenished.

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