

Flu took a heavy toll on children this season

Liz Szabo and Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY

1:24p.m. EDT March 22, 2013

The CDC says 105 children died of the flu this season, emphasizing the importance of vaccinating everyone older than 6 months.



(Photo: Matt Rourke, AP)

The flu has claimed the lives of 105 children this season, says a report out today from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Last year, a very mild year for flu, 34 children died, but this year, the deaths were more in line with a typical year. Flu seasons vary greatly in severity. In the 2003-2004 season, 153 children died, according to CDC numbers. The death toll is up to date as of March 16, but Michael Jhung, a medical officer in CDC's Influenza Division, said more deaths are possible: "Flu season is winding down but it's not over."

Of the children who died, 90% had not been vaccinated against the flu. "That's a remarkable number," Jhung said. Though this season's flu vaccine was not particularly effective in those over 65, it worked well in children, he said.

The CDC recommends an annual flu vaccination for everyone over age 6 months. Overall, 52% of all American kids got flu shots this year.

Of the children who died this year, 60% were at high risk from flu complications, either because they were under 2 or had a pre-existing medical condition, the CDC said. "The really telling proportion is the flip side of that: 40% of these deaths were in kids who were healthy," Jhung said.

The high number of children lost to the flu "is just profoundly sad," said William Schaffner, a professor at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. "Here we are in the 21st century, and this ancient scourge visits us every year and can still have such a profound effect on our children."

Even with the best hospital care, some children don't survive a bout with the flu, said Schaffner, an infectious disease specialist. "It reminds us that this is a virus that doesn't just involve the throat and the chest," he said. "It involves the whole body."

Though the flu shot is less effective than other common vaccines, getting one reduced the likelihood that a child would need to see a doctor for the flu by 60%, the CDC said. "It's the best one we have," Schaffner said of the flu vaccine. "Every death prevented is worth it."

Flu hit the USA beginning in late October and early November, about a month earlier than usual, Jhung said. It peaked in late December and early January, when it usually peaks towards the end of January and into February. The flu started in the South, hit the Northeast, then worked its way west, but there were weeks where every region had elevated activity.

This season the flu caused "moderately severe" illness, especially in hard-hit places such as Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago and parts of the upper Midwest, Schaffner said. "Several parts of the country were really inundated with it," he said. "They were backed up in the emergency room."

The CDC has tracked flu deaths in children since the 2003-2004 season, when 153 kids died of influenza. Like this year's outbreak, the flu season that year was early and intense.

Influenza is unpredictable, Schaffner said. Last year, the mildest flu season on record, influenza killed 34 children. The H1N1 pandemic killed 348 children from April 15, 2009, to Oct. 2, 2010.

Regina Booth, a Colorado mother, speaks about the importance of flu shots through an advocacy group called Families Fighting Flu. Two years ago, the flu killed her son Austin, a healthy 17-year-old. Before he died, Booth says, her family didn't bother with flu shots.

She said in a written statement, "Now there wouldn't be a flu season that goes by that I wouldn't get my children vaccinated to protect them."

The flu strains that will be in next season's flu vaccine have already been selected and vaccine manufacturers are working on them, Jhung said. They will ship in August, and people can begin to get vaccinated in early September.