



BY KATHIE LYNAS

Flu shot halves risk of more serious influenza illness. Canadians who received a flu shot in the current season may have reduced their risk of getting seriously ill by 50%, according to data from the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC).

The Centre developed a mid-season flu vaccine effectiveness estimate, using information from a surveillance network of physicians in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. Using physician-reported data on people seeking care for influenza-like illness, the BCCDC examined whether those patients were confirmed to have the flu and whether they had received a flu vaccine.

The analysis, released on January 15, 2013, estimated that people who were vaccinated in the 5 provinces cut in half their risk of becoming sick enough with influenza to require medical care.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) did a similar analysis of flu vaccine effectiveness in mid-January. The US CDC estimated that the 2012–13 vaccine reduced the risk of serious illness from flu by 62%.

Flu activity in Canada and United States slowing by early February 2013, but still well above normal. The worst of the flu season in North America appeared to be over by the first of week of February 2013, according to data from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and the US CDC.

Although both agencies reported national declines in influenza cases, activity remained high in some regions of both countries, and the numbers of infections continued to exceed those of the typical flu season.

In Canada, 1042 new flu cases were diagnosed between February 3 and 9, compared with 1511 cases in PHAC's surveillance report for January 27 to February 2. In the first week of February, the number of regions in the country

reporting influenza activity decreased—with most of the activity in Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland.

In its February 15 update, the US CDC said the nation's flu markers showed that influenza had likely peaked for the 2012–13 season. It reported that the number of respiratory specimens testing positive for flu fell from 23.3% in the previous report to 19.7%.

The current flu season in both countries began earlier than normal and saw unusually high numbers of cases. In Canada, for example, the cumulative total of flu cases for the season was 24,786 by February 9. By February 11, 2012, during the previous season, the cumulative total was just 1394 confirmed cases.

Experts warn electronic cigarettes not a healthy alternative to smoking.

Canadians seeking to quit smoking should not be “fooled by e-cigarettes,” warned the Canadian Lung Association during National Non-Smoking Week.

“These electronic devices could be potentially harmful to lung health,” said association spokesperson Margaret Bernhardt-Lowdon, in a news release issued January 21, 2013.

Electronic cigarettes are small canisters shaped like cigarettes. Using batteries to heat up fluid inside an interior cartridge, they create a vapour and simulate the sensation of smoking.

The cartridges may be filled with nicotine, flavouring and other chemicals. Health Canada has stated that e-cigarettes containing nicotine are not legal in this country; in 2009, the department issued an advisory warning Canadians not to use any of the devices. The Canadian Lung Association says e-cigarettes, however, are widely available in retail outlets and on the Internet.

People using e-cigarettes are inhaling unregulated and potentially harmful substances into their lungs, the association says. It urges Canadians seeking to quit smoking to use only

those nicotine-replacement therapies approved by Health Canada.

The association also expresses concern that e-cigarettes with “candy-like” flavours are being marketed and sold to youth and that their use could lead more young people to take up cigarette smoking.

Federal government draws on emergency stockpile of Tamiflu. Intense influenza activity in the 2012–13 season led the Canadian government to dip into its national emergency stockpile of oseltamivir (Tamiflu) in January—a supply designed to keep the nation prepared for a flu pandemic.

Unusually high demand for the flu drug in the last 3 months of 2012 raised concerns about a potential shortage in early 2013, when the country was still in the throes of an active flu season.

On January 8, 2013, the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada announced plans to release units from the national stockpile to Tamiflu manufacturer Roche Canada—for distribution to wherever it was needed across Canada.

Roche expected to be in a position to resupply the national stockpile in February.

According to Roche, approximately 89,000 units of Tamiflu were used in Canada between

October 1, 2012, and January 5, 2013—compared with 51,000 units consumed in the 1-year period between October 1, 2011, and September 30, 2012.

UK man becomes 10th person confirmed infected with potentially fatal SARS-like virus. The number of individuals infected with a mysterious severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-like coronavirus continued to slowly increase early in 2013—with the 10th global case reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) on February 8.

The man involved in this case was a United Kingdom resident who had recently returned to Manchester from a trip to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The first case of the NCoV (novel coronavirus) was identified in September 2012, following the death of a man in Saudi Arabia. All of the people infected were either living in or had travelled to the Middle East.

Five of the people who had contracted the acute respiratory illness died.

Although the numbers remain small, the WHO is monitoring the situation very closely, given the virus’ strong similarity to SARS. A global SARS epidemic killed 800 people in 2002 and 2003.