Europe may face second wave of infections as winter nears

Experts warn that seasonal flu would place more stress on health systems stretched by pandemic

Clara Cheng

A second wave of virus infection could be breaking over Europe and the situation could turn grim in the coming months, as the northern hemisphere approaches winter.

For instance, in Britain, more than 3,000 new cases were reported in 24 hours for the second day in a row last Saturday. France also chalked up 10,000 new infections on Saturday, close to the peak of 10,000 seen in April.

Other countries facing a resurgence include Spain, which became the first Western European nation to record more than 500,000 cases since the start of the outbreak.

Experts in Singapore cautioned that this could be a worrying trend.

Professor Paul Tanbush, president of the Asia Pacific Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infection, said that thought is uncertain if the increased numbers are due to more testing or more cases, it is likely the number of cases will go up in the colder months.

Respiratory virus flares in the winter as, among other reasons, people engage more in crowded indoor environments, facilitating transmission, Prof Tanbush told The Straits Times.

Another Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore's Duke-NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said seasonal influenza is often more prevalent in the colder months, and if Covid-19 and the flu co-circulate, it would place additional strain on already stretched healthcare systems.

However, Prof Cook remained cautiously optimistic that the measures used to prevent Covid-19 would also protect against other respiratory viruses.

"Evidence is also emerging from the southern hemisphere - which has already experienced their first winter of influenza and Covid-19 - that these influenza epidemics this winter were much smaller than usual because of the Covid-19 pandemic measures. So, if the distancing and the wearing of masks up, it may prevent the double epidemic. Influenza vaccination coverage rates might also increase as people are more aware of the need to protect themselves," Prof Cook said.

"It's really important for these at higher risk of flu to get a vaccine shot this year, especially elderly." Prof Tanbush, dean of the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said, however, that with the resilience of Covid-19 and influenza being similar, people may be confused as to whether they have the flu or Covid-19.

The simplest processes of contact tracing and quarantine might be confounded if people think they simply have the flu and do not come forward early enough, when in fact they have Covid-19, Prof Tanbush said.

"This behaviour can certainly complicate our ability to do additional community testing," he said.

"We need to be very mindful of whether governments and the public take the commitment to control the situation, monitor and enforce measures as we test down community transmission," he said.

"It is not believed that Covid-19 will necessarily take off during winter months since we now know that China and South Korea were able to successfully control large-scale community spread even during their wintertime months of February and March."

"However, if countries allow a second wave to emerge, we will need to be prepared to control a second wave," Prof Tanbush said.

Pupils at a school in Drama showing safe distancing rules at the start of the new school year yesterday.

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd.
Permission required for reproduction