

SEASONAL DISEASES

Influenza, 2021

Since mid-April 2021, 11 detections of influenza have been made in the two NICD syndromic surveillance for respiratory illness programmes, namely one influenza A(H3N2) and 10 influenza Bs. To date, six of the influenza Bs have been further identified as B/Victoria (Figure 1). Eight of the influenza cases were admitted with severe respiratory illness and three presented with mild illness as outpatients. Six of the patients were from KwaZulu-Natal Province, three from Gauteng Province and one each from the North West and Western Cape provinces.

Since the Viral Watch influenza sentinel surveillance programme started in 1984, the influenza season has rarely started with influenza B, which more commonly occurs at the end of the season. In the first decade of the Viral Watch, influenza B started the season in 1986 and 1994, though far fewer specimens were received and the programme was only active in Gauteng

Province. The last time the influenza season started with influenza B, was in 2016.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the influenza circulation has been much lower than we are accustomed to seeing at this time of the year. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that we may still experience an influenza season and that there is the chance that the influenza season may coincide with an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. It is important for health-providers to encourage their patients to get vaccinated for influenza, especially those who are at increased risk of severe influenza illness or complications. Information of individuals at increased risk of severe influenza illness or complications can be accessed on: https://www.nicd.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Influenza-guidelines_-April-2021-final.pdf

