

*DHHS has surveillance down to a science.*

It's October and that means the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has officially started flu surveillance.

“Surveillance tells us where the flu is and how fast it's spreading,” said Dr. Joann Schaefer, the state's Chief Medical Officer and Director of Public Health for DHHS. “If we can pinpoint outbreaks, we can take steps to contain them.”

DHHS uses multiple systems to track flu viruses:

- Sentinel physicians—17 physicians across state report the number of people they see each week with a flu-like illness.
- Rapid lab tests—88 laboratories run diagnostic tests weekly and report positive flu results to DHHS.
- Viral culture tests—Sometimes rapid tests come up false positive. DHHS confirms positive rapid tests with a viral culture test early during the flu season to make sure the illness is indeed the flu virus and see what type of flu virus it is. Samples are sent to the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory.

Positive results are reported to DHHS. Samples are then sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to assist with the development of next year's flu vaccine and help determine if the current circulating strain of flu is resistant to any antiviral medication.

- School surveillance—All schools in the state report absentee rates due to illness to local health departments, which pass on the information to DHHS weekly.
- Hospital data—Local health departments find out how many patients with flu-like illness were admitted into area hospitals every week and report those numbers to DHHS.
- Death reporting—Physicians are required to report child flu-related deaths to a public health agency and are encouraged to report flu-related deaths in adults as well. DHHS uses an electronic death registration system to determine how many deaths were caused by flu.

“If you look at the big picture, our surveillance shows what kind of flu virus is out there, the toll it’s taking on people, what drugs we can use to treat it, and whether or not it’s one of the strains in this year’s vaccine,” said Dr. Schaefer. “All of this information helps us and other health care providers protect the public.”