

2016–2017 SENTINEL INFLUENZA SURVEILLANCE IN VIRGINIA: **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

The purpose of flu surveillance

What is sentinel influenza surveillance in Virginia?

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) monitors the level of activity of influenza-like illness (ILI) each week from October through May. Those are the months when influenza ("flu") is most likely to occur in Virginia, and that time period is referred to as the "flu season".

VDH uses a number of different data sources to determine the level of flu activity that is occurring each week during flu season, including: laboratory reports, outbreak reports, and data on visits to hospital emergency departments and urgent care facilities for ILI.

The state public health laboratory, DCLS (Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services), performs confirmatory influenza testing on specimens collected from inpatients or outpatients with ILI who are seen by sentinel providers. These providers can be physicians' offices, urgent care facilities, or hospitals (including their affiliated laboratories).

VDH combines this information with other data, such as absentee rates in public schools, in order to form a dynamic picture of influenza's impact among populations. During the flu season, circulating influenza strains are evaluated and influenza activity levels are determined on a weekly basis.

How are flu surveillance data used?

Flu surveillance information enables state and local health officials to help keep physicians, hospitals, and facilities, such as nursing homes and schools, better apprised of what to expect during the flu season. Further, the information helps to support federal influenza surveillance activities that monitor for the emergence of potentially serious strains of influenza, including viral strains with pandemic potential. The identification of circulating strains of influenza virus also helps to inform decision-making for influenza vaccine production.

Am I supposed to send specimens every week, even I am not seeing large numbers of patients with flu symptoms?

Flu surveillance information is important. Please continue to send specimens from patients who fit the ILI case definition even if you feel that you are not seeing large numbers of patients with flu. The specimens serve an important role in identifying the onset and peak of the influenza season, allowing VDH to monitor disease trends throughout the year.

ILI: Case definition

What is the definition of influenza-like illness (ILI)?

For the purposes of sentinel influenza surveillance, an ILI case is defined by fever 100°F or greater along with cough and/or sore throat. A person presenting with these symptoms has ILI, and may be sampled for influenza surveillance, regardless of any rapid test result.

Obtaining specimens from patients with ILI

For detailed instructions on specimen collection, sentinel flu kits, and specimen shipping, visit the VDH sentinel influenza website at: <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/influenza-flu-in-virginia/influenza-surveillance/sentinel-influenza-reporting-for-virginia-2016-2017/>.

An informative video on how to collect a nasopharyngeal swab can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXohAo1d6tk> and is available on the VDH influenza surveillance website (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/influenza-flu-in-virginia/influenza-surveillance/>). Please share this video with staff in the facility who will be collecting specimens.

How many specimens should I collect per week?

Based on the population of Virginia, influenza epidemiologists have estimated that we need around 100 specimens per week at the start of the influenza season and more than 300 per week at the peak of the season to collect adequate information to provide situational awareness to characterize the strains of influenza virus that are circulating and determine the true onset and peak of the flu season.

We ask our sentinel providers to collect *at least 2* specimens a week, but we encourage you to collect more if possible, even up to five or six. You will receive two kits initially, each with supplies for five patients. Depending on how the season progresses, we may send more (or fewer) supplies within each kit shipment.

When should I collect the specimens?

We suggest that your site designate Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday as “Flu Day” and swab as many patients as possible with ILI, depending on the supplies you have on hand. We ask for specimens to be collected earlier in the week to avoid shipment arrival over the weekend.

How do I ask patients to volunteer a specimen for flu surveillance?

You know your patients much better than we do, so it is probably best to allow your knowledge of your patient to drive your decision to ask for a flu surveillance specimen. Most patients do not mind, since you may be obtaining a specimen for rapid testing anyway.

Rapid testing and sentinel flu testing

At our facility, patients with ILI symptoms have a nasopharyngeal specimen taken for rapid testing for strep and for influenza. Is it possible to use that single specimen for sentinel surveillance too?

You may perform the nasopharyngeal collection utilizing your office's rapid test swab and the surveillance swab provided by DCLS simultaneously. However, please ensure the flocked synthetic-tipped swab with flexible plastic is utilized for the surveillance test shipped to DCLS. Avoid wooden shafts.

If further guidance is needed, please e-mail the VDH Influenza Surveillance Coordinator at flu@vdh.virginia.gov or contact your local health district flu coordinator. For contact information for your local health department, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov/lhd.

If we do a rapid test for flu and the result is negative, why should we still send a specimen for state flu surveillance?

Research has shown that rapid tests for influenza have a fairly high rate of false negative results; that is, the test will say that the patient does not have influenza, when in fact the patient *does* have influenza. For this reason, it is a good practice to not base clinical decisions about patient care on the results of a rapid flu test alone. And, for the purposes of influenza surveillance, as long as the patient meets the criteria for influenza-like illness, VDH would like you to consider that patient a viable candidate for surveillance sampling.

The laboratory form and specimen

What information is needed on the specimen label?

Specimen labeling instructions are available on the VDH sentinel influenza website (<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/influenza-flu-in-virginia/influenza-surveillance/sentinel-influenza-reporting-for-virginia-2016-2017/>) under the "Important Links for Sentinel Providers" section.

What information is needed for the lab form that goes with the specimen?

Basic information on the patient and your facility is required, including the sentinel outbreak ID (**RES989FluSentinel16**). Please complete the DCLS Clinical Microbiology/Virology Request Form contained in the sentinel flu kit. If you need additional forms, contact Ms. Mattie Jones at DCLS (804) 648-4480, extension 104.

Shipping sentinel influenza specimens

DCLS wants to avoid rejecting specimens due to improper collection or transport procedures. Detailed specimen collection and shipment instructions are available on the VDH sentinel influenza website

(<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/influenza-flu-in-virginia/influenza-surveillance/sentinel-influenza-reporting-for-virginia-2016-2017/>) under the “Important Links for Sentinel Providers” section.

How do I store specimens until I can call for shipment?

Place specimens in the refrigerator (at 4°C) until they can be placed in the Styrofoam cooler for shipping. Do not freeze the specimens. Also note that the cold pack must be frozen at least 24 hours before being used for shipment. **DCLS must receive the sample within 72 hours of collection.**

How do I arrange for specimen pick up?

Use the DCLS courier service whenever possible, if your site has access to it. See <http://www.dgs.state.va.us/CourierList/tabid/829/Default.aspx> for a list of courier sites. In other cases, call FedEx for a pick up at **1-800-463-3339** regarding package drop off for delivery to DCLS. Your local health department may also be able to assist with specimen pick up, but this is dependent upon staff resources. Discuss this with your district epidemiologist/influenza coordinator on a case-by-case basis. **Do not ship on Friday or before a holiday.**

What about shipping around state holidays?

VDH and the state laboratory (DCLS) are closed on state holidays and on weekends. Transport of specimens occurs overnight; therefore, specimens should not be shipped before a state holiday (for example, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving). Likewise, specimens should not be shipped on Fridays, as the laboratory is closed to specimen receipt on weekends.

Whom do I call if I have a specimen-related question, problem, or shipping issue?

Call DCLS at (804) 648-4480, extension 271 or 272. If the laboratory is unavailable, call your local health district epidemiologist.

Use of surveillance data at my healthcare facility

Will I be able to use the surveillance testing data to help diagnose and/or treat my patients?

Please note that laboratory testing is for surveillance purposes only. Results will not be available within a timeframe suitable for patient management. Routine influenza surveillance laboratory results will be mailed to you.

Supplies of specimen collection kits

How do I order lab kits to replace the ones I send off each week?

We will do our best to automatically send out kit replacements. You are always welcome to contact the state laboratory, DCLS, to order replacement kits: 804-648-4480 X 104.

Identifying patients for collection of influenza surveillance specimens

Where I work it's difficult to identify patients who should be sampled before they leave our facility. How can I address this problem?

Identifying patients, obtaining specimens, and coordinating shipping are a team effort. At the beginning of your work shift, remind your co-workers of the need to identify patients with ILI, and ask them to help you get the tasks completed.

My co-workers are very busy and sometimes I get some resistance when I ask for help with flu surveillance tasks. How can I enlist my co-workers in the effort?

VDH can help. If your facility needs information or support, or an in-service on the importance of influenza surveillance, please e-mail the VDH Influenza Surveillance Coordinator at flu@vdh.virginia.gov or contact your local health district flu coordinator.