



# Jillian Skinner MP

## Minister for Health Minister for Medical Research

---

### MEDIA RELEASE

---

Sunday 23 March 2014

#### IT'S TIME TO *BE WINTER WISE*

Health Minister Jillian Skinner today urged the people of NSW to prepare for the influenza season and *Be Winter Wise* before the full force of the season hits.

While anyone can get the flu and everyone should protect themselves against it, NSW Health's *Be Winter Wise* campaign is focusing on pregnant women, the elderly and people with chronic medical conditions.

"Although we are still experiencing warm weather, people should not be complacent when it comes to the dangers of the flu. In susceptible people, flu symptoms can quickly progress to become life threatening," Mrs Skinner said.

"We have learnt from our very intensive work in addressing the spread of the pandemic that you can never start preparing too early.

"Our hospitals are equipped and preparing to manage the increased case load that comes during the winter months but we are urging people to be aware of how they can stay well during the influenza season and stay out of hospital," she said.

Mrs Skinner said everyone, but particularly the high-risk and vulnerable, should:

- **Get well** - practice healthy behaviours (cover your face when you cough or sneeze, wash your hands regularly, stay home if unwell).
- **Get a jab** - the best time to be vaccinated against the flu is in autumn so contact your GP and organise a flu vaccination now.
- **Make a *Winter Wise* plan** - cold weather can worsen pre-existing chronic illnesses such as asthma and diabetes. Update your illness management plan or speak to your GP if you don't have one in place.

Public health experts estimate that each year between 10 to 20 per cent of the NSW population will get seasonal influenza.

Dr Jeremy McAnulty, the Director of Health Protection NSW, said the northern hemisphere has experienced widespread influenza over the past months, with influenza A(H1N1) pandemic strain, A(H3N2) and influenza B circulating to different extents in different countries.

An unusually high level of influenza has also been seen in NSW over summer.

“The Australian flu vaccine has been updated to more closely match the influenza strains likely to circulate in NSW this year. So get a shot in preparation for this season,” Dr McAnulty said.

NSW Health is encouraging all pregnant women to be vaccinated against the influenza virus. Vaccination during pregnancy is safe and can be undertaken at any stage of a pregnancy.

“Pregnancy takes its toll on a woman’s respiratory and immune systems, so even healthy women with an uncomplicated pregnancy can develop life-threatening influenza,” Dr McAnulty said.

“The seasonal flu shot has been given to pregnant women for many years and continues to be the best defence against the flu for pregnant women.”

Babies born to vaccinated women have the added advantage of protection against the flu during their first six months of life, when they are too young to have the flu vaccine.

NSW Ambulance Chief Executive Ray Creen encouraged people to take heed of the *Be Winter Wise* message.

“If people take precautionary measures, such as getting a flu jab early in the season, they will not only protect themselves but will also ensure Triple Zero (000) and hospital emergency departments are for those patients who really need urgent medical help, not those who could have avoided hospitalisation,” Mr Creen said.

The influenza vaccine is available free to pregnant women and other people considered vulnerable to severe influenza, including those with chronic illness, people aged 65 years and older and Aboriginal people aged 15 years and older.

Mrs Skinner said the NSW health system has the capacity to deal with the increased winter case load.

“We have increased the health budget by 5.2 per cent this financial year - to \$17.9 billion. This provides for an anticipated 69,000 extra emergency patients and 34,000 extra overnight hospitals patients,” she said.

“A record number of nurses - 4100 (2800 FTE) extra since the March 2011 election - and an extra 1400 FTE doctors are providing patients with high quality care.

“Our health facilities are getting ready for the winter influenza season and I encourage all members of the community to get ready too,” Mrs Skinner said.