Influenza Activity in the Caribbean

Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, September 26, 2013. The Caribbean, like other regions in the Americas, experiences seasonal influenza activity. Improved health monitoring by Ministries of Health is providing more timely and detailed information on viruses currently circulating in the Region. This has resulted in the recent confirmation by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) of the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus from samples received from St Vincent.

The identification of 2009 H1N1 influenza virus from persons seen at health care facilities in St. Vincent is as a result of the increased investment by Ministries of Health, CARPHA and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in laboratory services and surveillance.

In the Caribbean, the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus is the most commonly identified influenza virus circulating in the Region and this is not an unexpected finding. There have been no deaths related to this incident and all patients have recovered and been discharged from hospital. In addition, Ministries of Health in the Region are aware of the situation and are closely monitoring their health facilities.

CARPHA and PAHO would like to advise members of the public to practice respiratory hygiene measures in order to reduce the risk of transmission of influenza and other respiratory viruses. You should cover your mouth with a tissue or handkerchief, or use your elbow, if sneezing or coughing. You should safely dispose of used tissues; wash your hands with soap and water after coughing and sneezing and before and after meal preparation, eating and use of the toilets. Alternatively, you may use an alcohol based hand-sanitizer.

Further information on respiratory viruses including influenza may be found at the PAHO website: http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3154&Itemid=2498
Background Information:

1. Influenza is a viral infection that affects mainly the nose, throat, bronchi and, occasionally, lungs. Infection usually lasts for about a week, and is characterized by the sudden onset of high fever, aching muscles, headache and severe malaise, non-productive cough, sore throat and rhinitis. The virus is transmitted easily from person to person via droplets and small particles produced when infected people cough or sneeze. Influenza tends to spread rapidly in seasonal epidemics. Most infected people recover within one to two weeks without requiring medical treatment. However, in the very young, the elderly, and those with other serious medical conditions, infection can lead to severe complications of the underlying condition, pneumonia and death.

Influenza A (H1N1) pdm 2009 virus (also referred to as 2009 H1N1 influenza virus) is the subtype of influenza A virus that was the most common cause of human influenza in 2009. In June 2009, the World Health Organization declared a new strain of swine-origin H1N1 as a pandemic. This strain is often called “swine flu” by the public and the media. In August 2010, the World Health Organization declared the H1N1 influenza pandemic over, saying worldwide influenza activity had returned to typical seasonal patterns. Internationally, 2009 H1N1 viruses and seasonal influenza viruses are co-circulating in many parts of the world and the 2009 H1N1 virus is considered to be a regular seasonal influenza virus and is also included in seasonal influenza vaccines.

2. The Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) is the new single regional public health agency for the Caribbean. It was legally established in July 2011 by an Inter-Governmental Agreement signed by Caribbean Community Member States and began operation in January 2013. The Agency rationalises public health arrangements in the Region by combining the functions of five Caribbean Regional Health Institutes (RHIs) into a single agency. They are:
   - The Caribbean Environmental Health Institute (CEHI)
   - The Caribbean Epidemiology Centre (CAREC)
   - The Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI)
   - The Caribbean Health Research Council (CHRC)
   - The Caribbean Regional Drug Testing Laboratory (CRDTL)

CARPHA brings these RHIs together as one strong force under a public health umbrella under which issues requiring a regional response can be addressed.

For further information on CARPHA go to: [http://carpha.org/?page_id=60](http://carpha.org/?page_id=60)

3. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), founded in 1902, is the world’s oldest international public health agency. It provides technical cooperation and mobilizes partnerships to improve health and quality of life in the countries of the Americas. PAHO is the specialized health agency of the
Inter-American System and serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO). Together with WHO, PAHO is a member of the United Nations system.

For further information on PAHO go to: