



# Australian Government

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## Department of Health

# AUSTRALIAN INFLUENZA SURVEILLANCE REPORT

No. 9, 2019  
12 to 25 August 2019

The Department of Health acknowledges the providers of the many sources of data used in this report and greatly appreciates their contribution.

### KEY MESSAGES

- **Activity** – Currently, overall influenza and influenza-like illness (ILI) activity is lower than average for this time of year compared to previous years, and current activity is consistent with activity in previous years following a peak. At the national level, notifications of laboratory-confirmed influenza continued to decrease in the past fortnight following an apparent peak in early July.
- **Severity** – Clinical severity for the season to date, as measured through the proportion of patients admitted directly to ICU, and deaths attributed to influenza, is considered low.
- **Impact** – Impact for the season to date, as measured through the number of sentinel hospital beds occupied by patients with influenza and the rate of Flutracking respondents absent from normal duties, is considered to be low to moderate.
- **Virology** – The majority of confirmed influenza cases reported nationally were influenza A in the year to date (79.5%) and reporting fortnight (70.7%). Of the influenza A cases that were subtyped, there has been a higher proportion of influenza A(H3N2) compared to influenza A(H1N1)pdm09. The proportion of cases attributed to influenza B has increased slightly in the past fortnight, following a steady decline during July.
- **Vaccine match and effectiveness** – Antigenic analysis of circulating influenza viruses in Australia in 2019 shows that the influenza A(H1N1)pdm09 and influenza B/Yamagata-lineage viruses are well matched to the 2019 influenza vaccine while some A(H3N2) and B/Victoria-lineage viruses are less well matched. Overall vaccine effectiveness appears good and as expected based on preliminary estimates from sentinel general practice (ASPREN) and sentinel hospital (FluCAN-PAEDS) surveillance systems, noting that effectiveness typically ranges from around 40-60% each year.

### Introduction

Each year, the influenza virus changes and different strains can circulate in the population. Particular subtypes of influenza can affect different groups of the population more than others. Depending on the susceptibility of the population, the subtypes that are circulating and the changes to the virus itself, the influenza season can be very different year to year. Our surveillance systems help us to understand influenza activity, severity of the infection in individuals and impact of the illness on society in Australia. We are also able to monitor which influenza viruses are circulating, which populations might be more affected, the effectiveness of the vaccine, and any resistance to antiviral drugs that has developed.

### 1. Activity

*Activity measures the capacity of the circulating influenza viruses to spread person to person and may be measured indirectly through systems that monitor influenza-like illness and more directly through systems that monitor laboratory confirmed influenza.*

#### Influenza-like illness

Following high levels of ILI activity over the interseasonal period, there has been an overall decrease in ILI in the community in the last fortnight and is currently below the 5 year average.

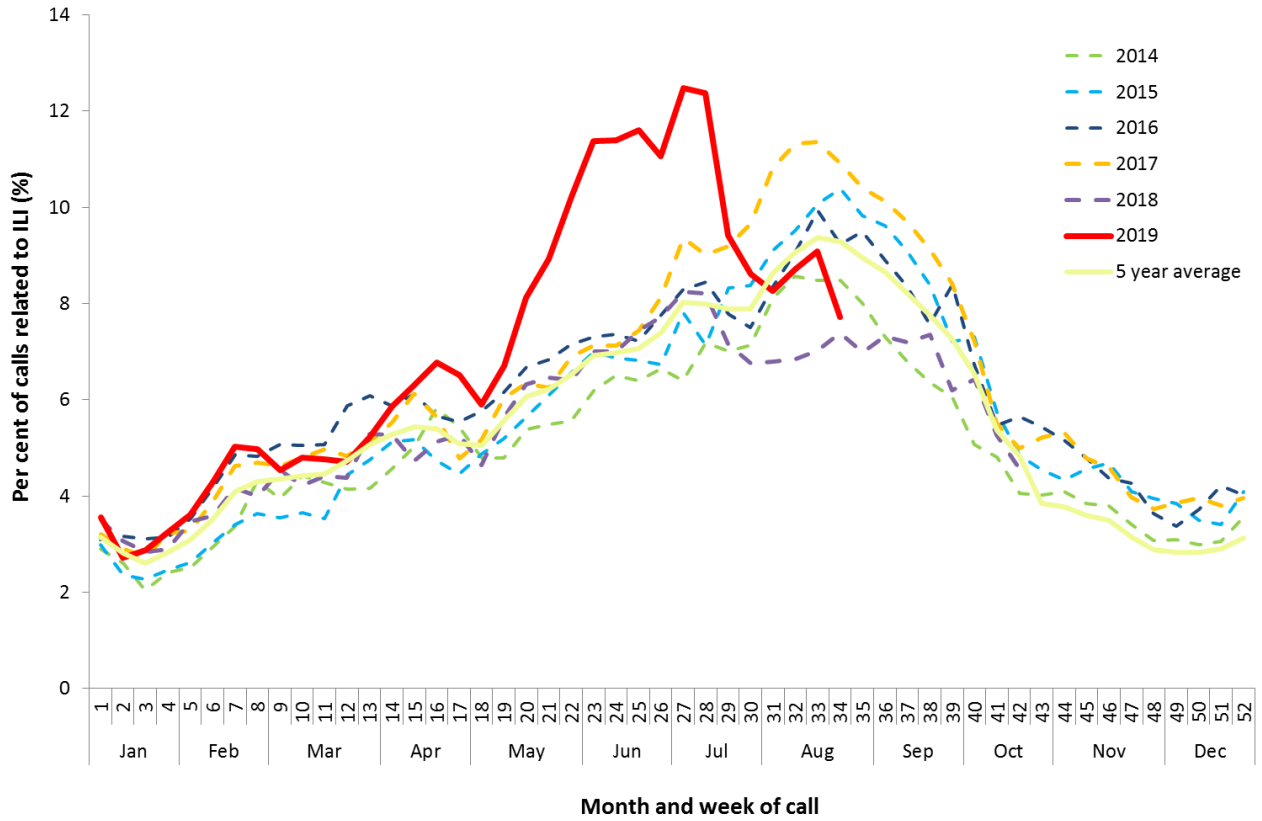
- **Healthdirect:** In the year to date, the proportion of calls to the Healthdirect public health hotline related to ILI have been declining following a peak of 12.5% in week 27. In weeks 33 and 34, 9.1% and 7.7% of calls, respectively, were related to ILI. This is within the range of previous years (Figure 1).
- **Sentinel General Practitioners (ASPREN):** 9.3 per 1,000 consultations in sentinel general practices were due to ILI in week 34 (Figure 2), decreasing from a peak of 13.4 per 1,000 consultations in week 27. ILI consultations are lower than the 5 year average for this time of year and activity is now consistent with that in previous years following a peak.

- **Flutracking:** 1.9% and 2.0% of Flutracking participants reported ILI (fever and cough) in weeks 33 and 34, respectively, which is within the range of the last five years. This is a slight increase compared to the previous fortnight. In the year to date, reports of ILI among Flutracking participants peaked in week 24 at 2.2% (Figure 3).
- **Proportion of ILI with confirmed influenza seen by sentinel GPs:** Of the 195 ILI cases presenting to sentinel ASPREN GPs this fortnight who were tested for influenza, 69 (35.4%) had a positive result. This is a slight increase from the previous fortnight when 33.5% (80/239) of swabbed ILI patients tested positive for influenza. In the reporting fortnight, 27.7% (n=54) of swabbed patients were infected with influenza A, which was the most common respiratory virus detected; this was followed by rhinovirus (n=41, 21.0%).
- **Proportion of ILI with confirmed influenza in sentinel labs:** In the reporting fortnight, the pooled unweighted percentage of tests positive for influenza across all sentinel laboratories was 16.5%, a slight increase from 14.1% reported in the previous fortnight. In the past fortnight, percent positivity was highest in Tasmania (TAS) (Figure 4). In the year to date, overall detections of influenza across sentinel laboratories peaked in weeks 16 (26.9%) and 23 (25.8%).  
The most commonly detected respiratory viruses this fortnight by laboratory site were:
  - influenza A in both weeks by the Institute of Clinical Pathology and Medical Research in New South Wales (NSW) and TAS;
  - rhinovirus in both weeks by South Australia (SA);
  - picornavirus in both weeks by the Victorian Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory (VIDRL); and
  - respiratory syncytial virus in both weeks by PathWest in Western Australia (WA).
- **NNDSS notifications<sup>1</sup>:** In the year to date, there have been 247,277 notifications of laboratory-confirmed influenza reported to the National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System (NNDSS). This fortnight there were 26,912 notifications of laboratory-confirmed influenza reported to the NNDSS. This is a slight decrease in reported cases compared to the previous fortnight (n=27,191). Notifications this fortnight continue to be above the 5 year average for the same period (n=20,408) (Figure 5). In the year to date, there has been an overall decline in notifications per week following a peak in week 27 (n=18,304).
- **FluCAN:** Since seasonal sentinel hospital surveillance began on 1 April 2019, a total of 3,119 people have been admitted with confirmed influenza (Figure 6). In the fortnight to 25 August 2019, 180 people have been admitted with confirmed influenza. This is a decrease from the 253 reported in the previous fortnight, however, it is likely that this is a result of an administrative backlog and that numbers will be revised upwards. There has been an overall decline in the number of hospitalisations per week following a peak in week 26 (n=220). In the reporting fortnight, the total number of admissions is less than the 5-year average for the same period (n=397.6), with the pattern of activity now reflecting a typical season, albeit far earlier than usual.

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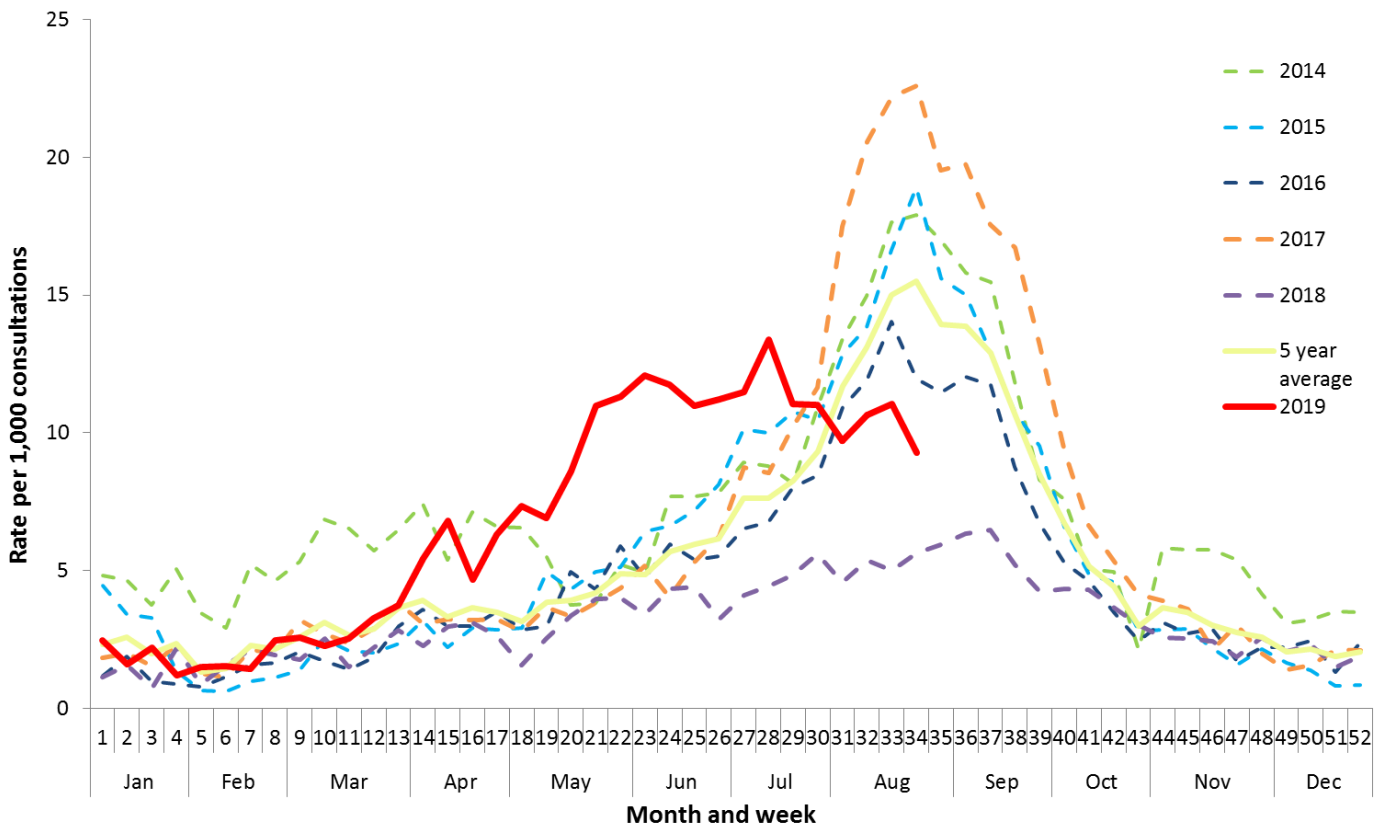
<sup>1</sup>NNDSS notification data provided for the current and most recent weeks may be incomplete. All data are preliminary and subject to change as updates are received.

**Figure 1. Per cent of calls to Healthdirect related to ILI, Australia, 1 January 2014 to 25 August 2019, by month and week of call.**



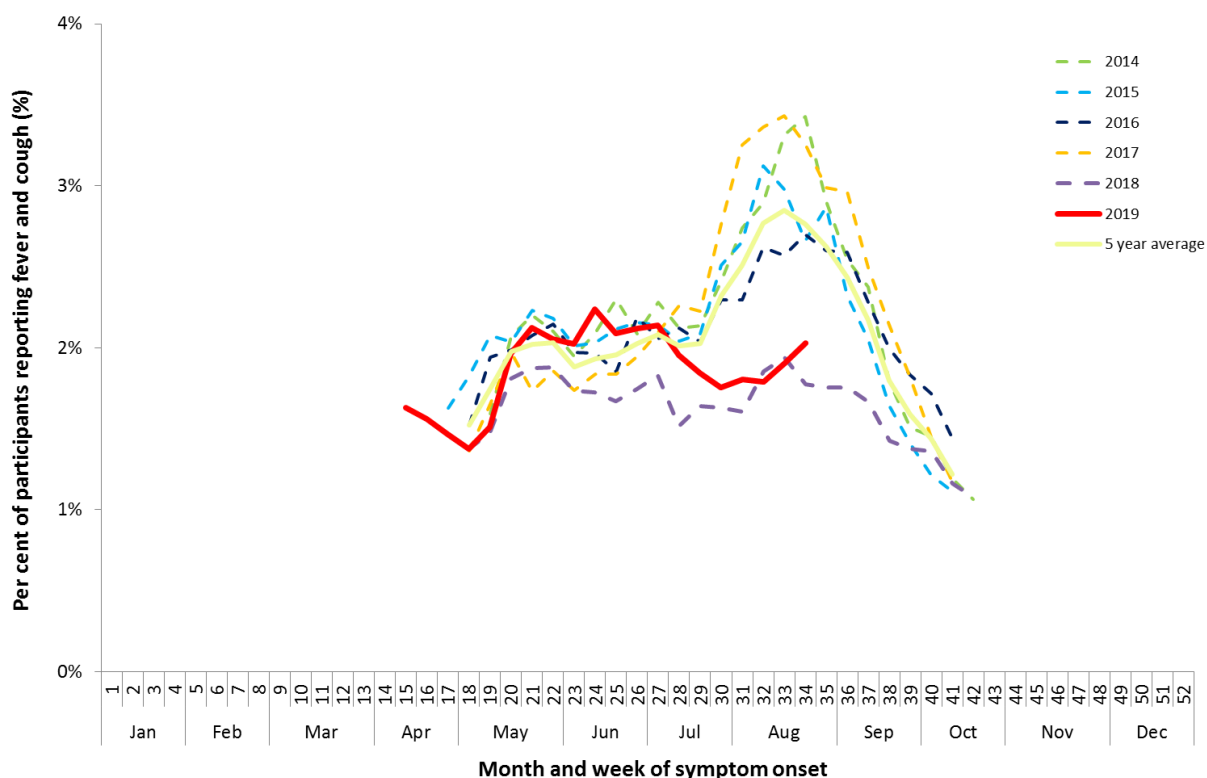
Source: Healthdirect

**Figure 2. Unweighted rate of ILI reported from sentinel GP surveillance systems, Australia, 1 January 2014 to 25 August 2019, by month and week.**



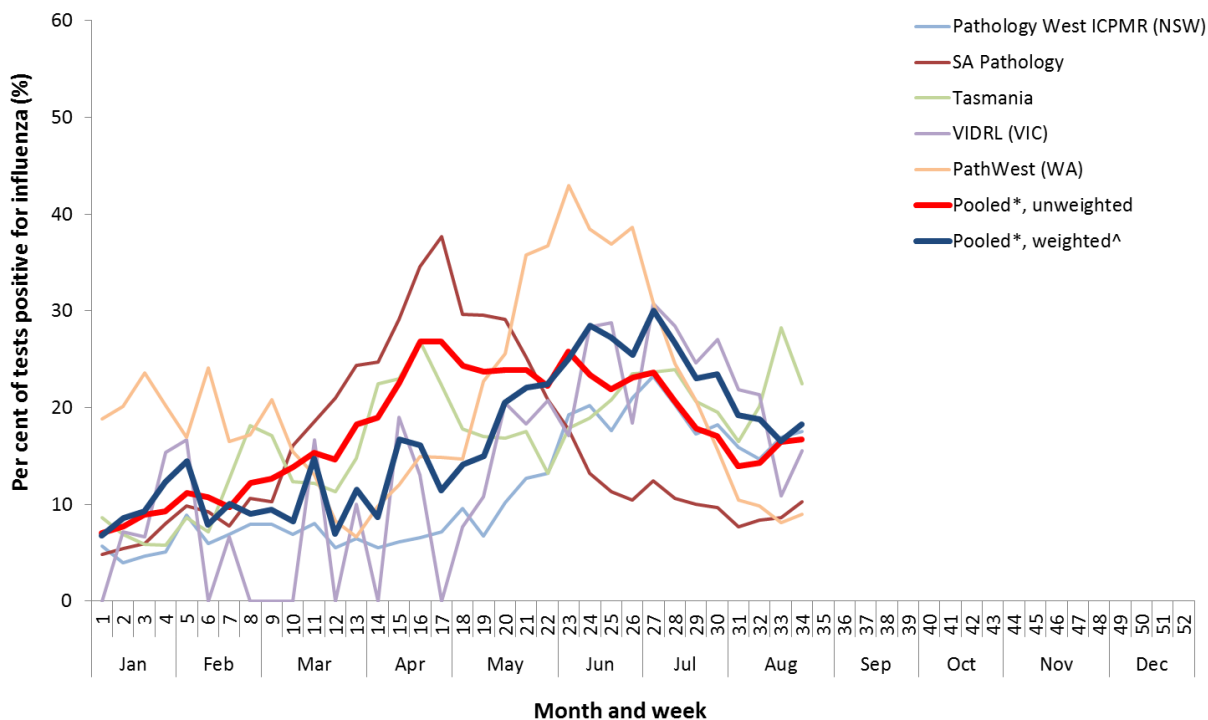
Source: ASPREN

**Figure 3. Proportion of fever and cough among FluTracking participants, Australia, between April and October, 2014 to 2019, by month and week.**



Source: FluTracking

**Figure 4. Proportion of sentinel laboratory tests positive for influenza, 1 January to 25 August 2019, by contributing laboratory or jurisdiction and month and week.**

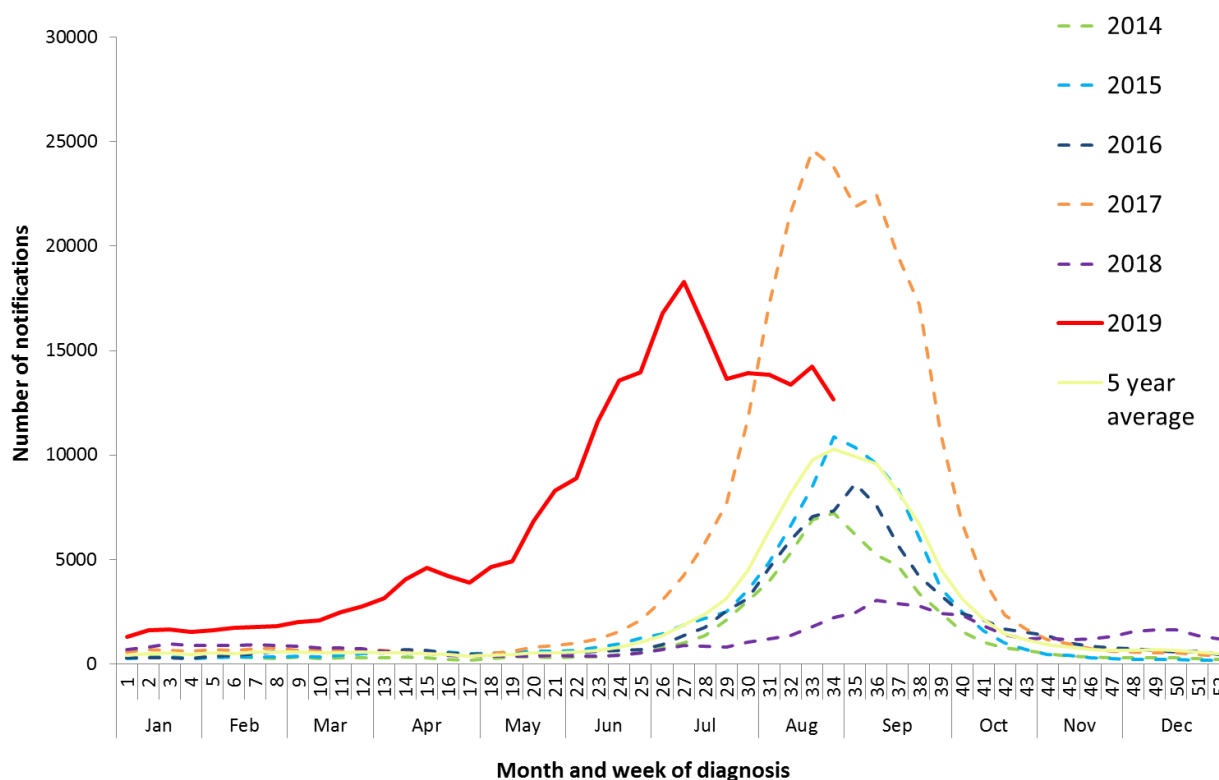


\* Pooled percentage positive indicators should be interpreted with caution, noting that collectively pooled contributing laboratories are not representative of testing across Australia and individually contributing laboratories may not be representative of the jurisdiction in which they are located.

^ Weighted according to jurisdictional population in which laboratories are located.

The percentage of tests positive for influenza in the interseasonal period should be interpreted with caution due to small numbers of tests being undertaken in this time, resulting in high variability in the indicators.

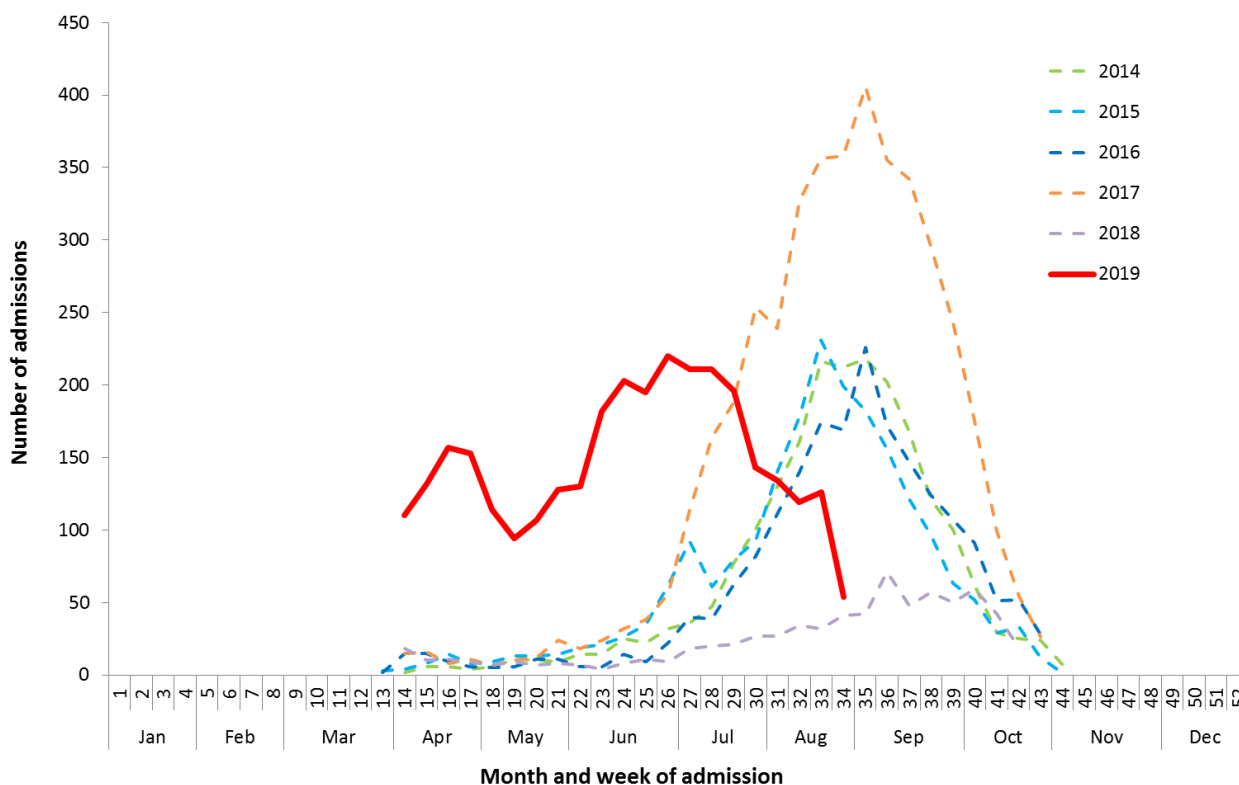
**Figure 5. Notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza, Australia, 1 January 2013 to 25 August 2019, by month and week of diagnosis.\***



Source: NNDSS

\*NNDSS notification data provided for the current and most recent weeks may be incomplete. All data are preliminary and subject to change as updates are received.

**Figure 6. Number of influenza hospitalisations at sentinel hospitals, between March and October, 2014 to 2019 by month and week.\***



Source: FluCAN

\*FluCAN data provided for the current fortnight may be incomplete. All data are preliminary and subject to change as updates are received.

### Geographical distribution of activity

- **Jurisdictional reports:** In the fortnight ending 25 August 2019, the geographic spread of influenza activity was reported by state and territory health departments as being:
  - Widespread – NSW, SA, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the Southern and Central regions of Queensland (QLD), TAS and Victoria (VIC).
  - Regional – all regions of WA.
  - Localised – all regions of the Northern Territory (NT) and the Tropical region of QLD (Figure 7).

The change in activity level was reported by state and territory health departments as being:

- Increased – NSW, SA and TAS.
  - No change – Rural south region of WA, VIC and all regions of QLD.
  - Decreased – Northwest and Perth regions of WA, all regions of the NT and ACT.
- **NNDSS:** Of the 26,912 notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza reported to the NNDSS in the last fortnight, 10,862 were from NSW, 8,941 from QLD, 5,200 from VIC, 686 from SA, 477 from ACT, 408 from WA, 281 from TAS and 57 from NT (Figure 8).  
Of the 247,277 notifications of influenza reported to the NNDSS this year to 25 August 2019, 93,517 were from NSW, 51,274 from VIC, 50,752 from QLD, 22,939 from SA, 21,977 from WA, 3,226 from ACT, 2,355 from TAS and 1,237 from NT.

For further information regarding influenza activity at the jurisdictional level, please refer to the following State and Territory health surveillance reports:

- ACT: [ACT Influenza Report](http://www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/population-health/winter-wellbeing-and-flu/flu-act) (www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/population-health/winter-wellbeing-and-flu/flu-act)
- NSW: [Influenza Surveillance Report](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/reports.aspx) (http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Influenza/Pages/reports.aspx)
- QLD: [Statewide Weekly Influenza Surveillance Report](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/diseases-infection/surveillance/reports/flu) (https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/diseases-infection/surveillance/reports/flu)
- SA: [Weekly Epidemiological Summary](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/about+us/health+statistics/surveillance+of+notifiable+conditions) (Influenza section) (http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/about+us/health+statistics/surveillance+of+notifiable+conditions)
- TAS: [fluTAS Reports](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable_diseases_prevention_unit) (http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable\_diseases\_prevention\_unit)
- VIC: [Influenza Surveillance Reports](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases/infectious-diseases-surveillance/seasonal-influenza-reports) (https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases/infectious-diseases-surveillance/seasonal-influenza-reports)
- WA: [Virus WATch](http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/F_I/Infectious-disease-data/Virus-WATch) (http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/F\_I/Infectious-disease-data/Virus-WATch)

Figure 7. Map of influenza activity by state and territory, Australia, 12 to 25 August 2019

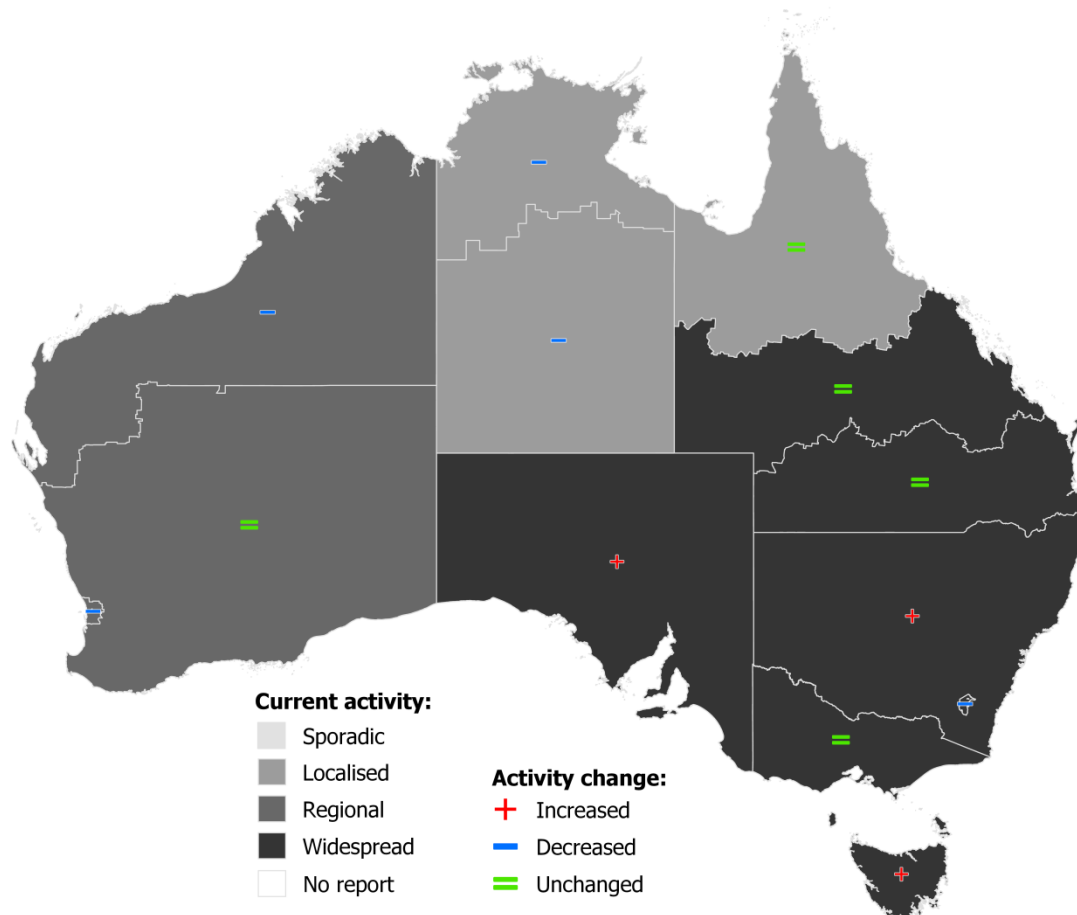
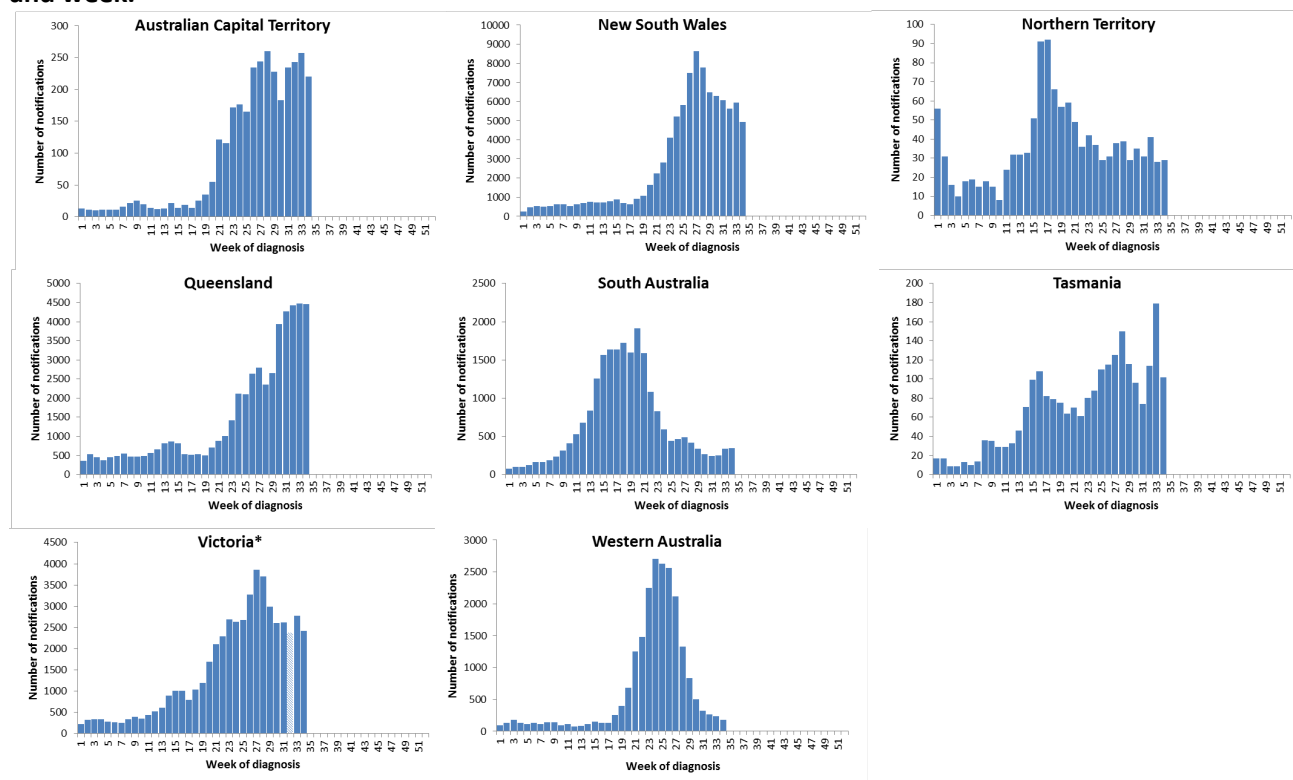


Figure 8. Notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza\*, 1 January to 25 August 2019, by state or territory and week.



Source: NNDSS

\*NNDSS notification data provided for the current and most recent weeks may be incomplete. All data are preliminary and subject to change as updates are received. Victoria is currently experiencing a significant backlog in data entry.

## 2. Severity

*Severity is a measure of adverse outcomes or complications as a result of influenza or influenza-like illness (ILI) such as hospital referrals, admissions, need for intensive care and deaths. Measuring and understanding the severity of circulating influenza is difficult to establish at the beginning of the influenza season. The proportion of confirmed influenza cases with serious outcomes might be skewed initially because there are only a small number of people notified with influenza at the beginning of the season. This means that the measure of severity will vary substantially fortnight to fortnight until after the peak of the season when there is enough data for measurements to stabilise. An assessment of severity can be provided once the signals become clearer.*

Clinical severity for the season to date, as measured through the proportion of patients admitted directly to ICU, and deaths attributed to influenza, is low.

### Intensive care admissions

- **FluCAN:** Since seasonal sentinel hospital surveillance began on 1 April 2019, 201 (6.4%) of the 3,119 people admitted to sentinel hospitals with confirmed influenza were admitted to ICU. In the fortnight to 25 August 2019, 11 (6.1%) of the 180 people admitted to sentinel hospitals with confirmed influenza were admitted to ICU. This is a slight decrease in the proportion of people admitted to ICU compared to the previous fortnight (6.3%).

### Deaths in confirmed influenza cases

- **NNDSS:** In the year to date, 590 influenza-associated deaths have been notified to the NNDSS. The majority of deaths were due to influenza A (97%, n=572). Where subtyping information was available, 103 deaths were associated with influenza A(H3N2) and 27 with influenza A(H1N1)pdm09. Sixteen deaths were associated with influenza B. The median age of deaths notified was 86 years (range <1 to 105 years).

*The number of influenza-associated deaths reported to the NNDSS does not represent the true mortality associated with this disease. The number of deaths is reliant on the follow up of cases to determine the outcome of their infection. The follow up of cases is not a requirement of notification, and are only inclusive of laboratory-confirmed cases of influenza. Due to retrospective revision, the variation across jurisdictions in methodology, representativeness and timeliness of death data, and reporting of an outcome of infection not being a requirement of notification, year on year comparisons of deaths in notified cases of influenza may not be reliable.*

## 3. Impact

*Impact measures how the influenza epidemic affects society, including stress on health-care resources and societal and economic consequences.*

Impact for the season to date, as measured through the number of sentinel hospital beds occupied by patients with influenza and the rate of Flutracking respondents absent from normal duties, is low to moderate.

### Absenteeism

- **Flutracking:** In weeks 33 and 34, 1.4% of Flutracking survey respondents reported having ILI and taking time off regular duties while unwell. This is at the lower end of the historical range for this time of year.

### Use of hospital beds

- **FluCAN:** In the past fortnight, 2.6% of beds available in FluCAN hospitals were occupied with patients with confirmed influenza, compared to 3.7% in the previous fortnight and a high of 6.1% in early July. This is within the range of the rate of influenza admissions per 1000 available hospital beds in the past 5 years. However, it is likely that a number of hospitals may have a backlog of cases, and it is expected that numbers for the past fortnight may be revised upwards.

## 4. Virology

### National notification data

- **NNDSS:** In the reporting fortnight, 70.7% of notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza to the NNDSS were influenza A (67.8% influenza A(untyped), 2.7% influenza A(H3N2) and 0.2%



influenza A(H1N1)pdm09), 29.2% were influenza B and less than 1% were influenza A&B co-infections or untyped (Figure 9).

- For the year to 25 August 2019, 79.5% of notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza to the NNDSS were influenza A (74.3% influenza A(unsubtyped), 4.1% influenza A(H3N2) and 1.1% influenza A(H1N1)pdm09), 20.2% were influenza B, and less than 1% were influenza A&B co-infections or untyped. The proportion of all notifications year to date reported as influenza A has ranged across jurisdictions from 72.7% in WA to 93.4% in TAS (Figure 10).

Reference Laboratory data

- **World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza (WHOCC):** From 1 January to 26 August 2019, the WHOCC characterised 3,104 influenza viruses. Of these, 92% were influenza A (59% influenza A(H3N2) and 33% influenza A(H1N1)pdm09) and 7% were influenza B (6% influenza B Victoria lineage and 1% influenza B Yamagata lineage).

Sentinel laboratory surveillance

- In the reporting fortnight, 67.5% of influenza positive samples detected in sentinel laboratories were influenza A (58.7% were influenza A(unsubtyped), 8.2% were influenza A(H3N2), and less than 1% were influenza A(H1N1)pdm09), and 32.5% were influenza B (Figure 11). This is an increase in the proportion attributed to influenza B compared to the previous fortnight (28.1%).

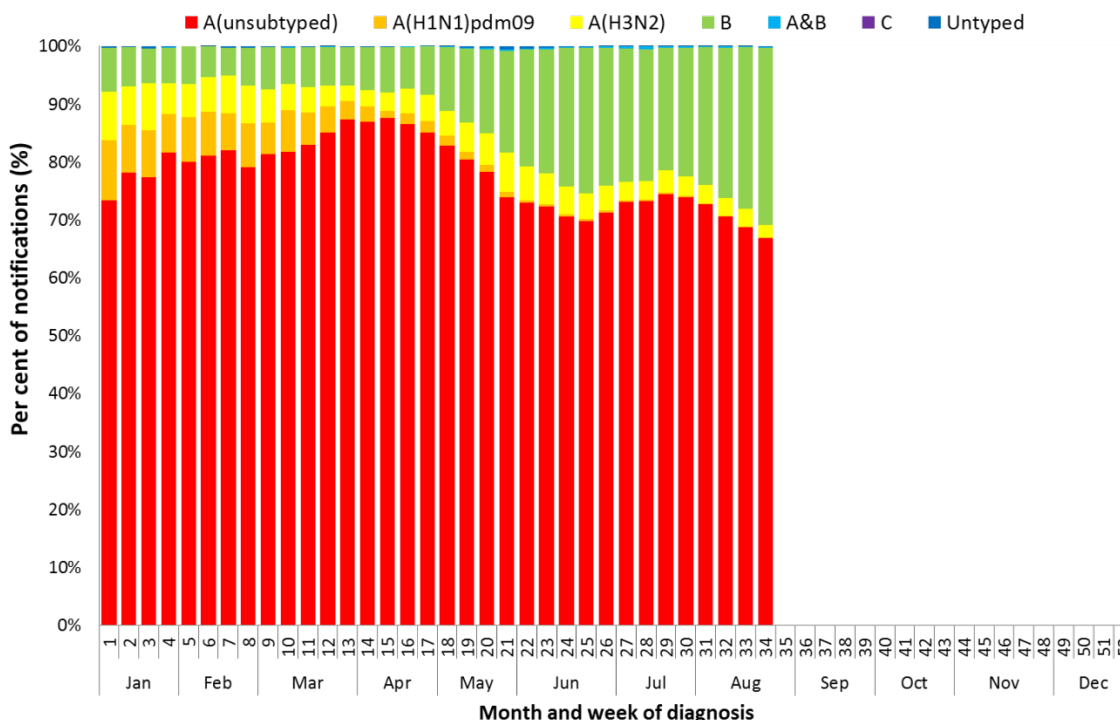
Sentinel GP surveillance

- **ASPREN:** Of the 69 influenza positive samples detected this fortnight through swab testing patients presenting with ILI to ASPREN sentinel GPs, 4.3% were influenza A (unsubtyped), 72.5% were influenza A(H3N2) and 1.4% were influenza A(H1N1)pdm09. The remaining 15 (21.7%) were influenza B (Figure 12).

Sentinel hospital surveillance

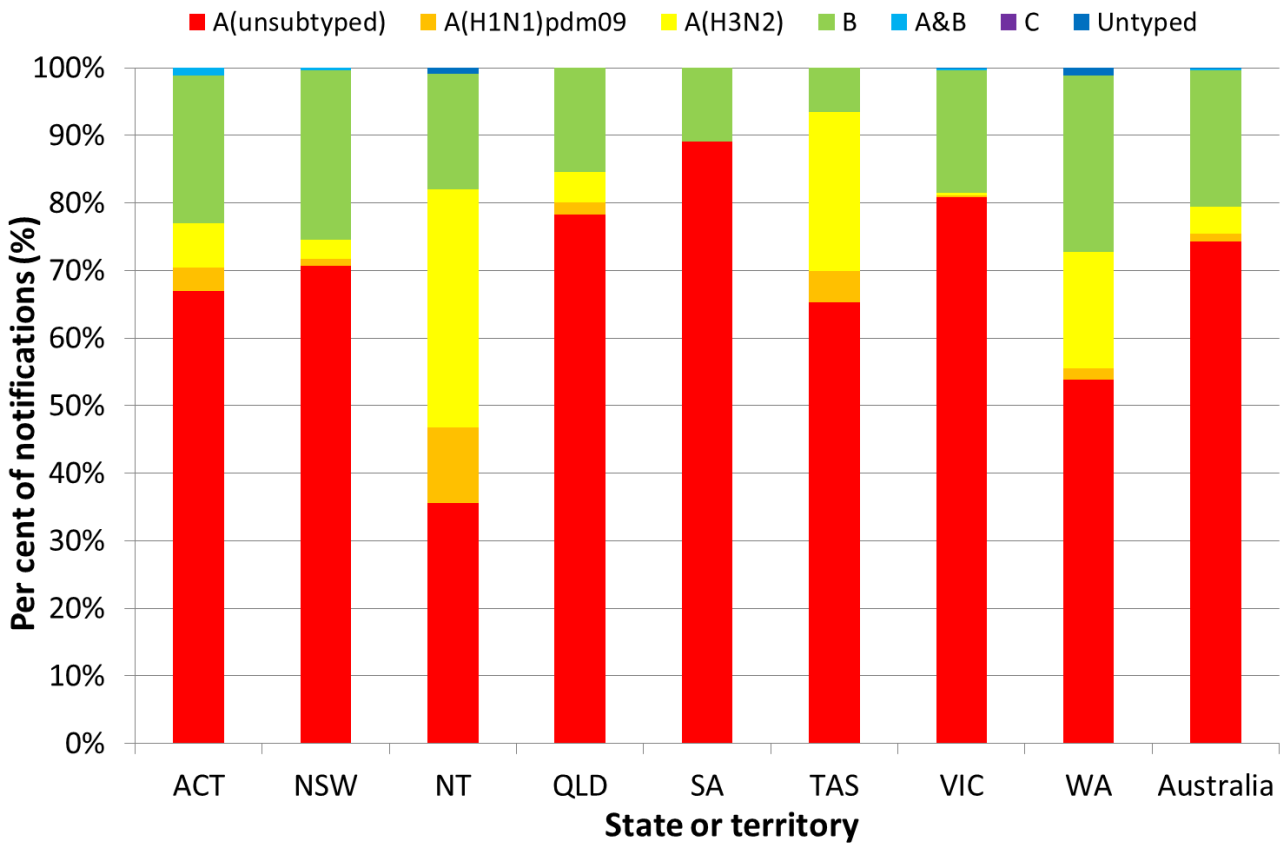
- **FluCAN:** Since seasonal sentinel hospital surveillance began on 1 April 2019, 85% of admissions with confirmed influenza to sentinel hospitals were influenza A (61% influenza A(unsubtyped), 21% influenza A(H3N2) and 4% influenza A(H1N1) pdm09) and 15% were influenza B (Figure 13). Of the 201 patients admitted directly to ICU, 181 patients were infected with influenza A (61.7% influenza A(unsubtyped), 19.4% influenza A(H3N2) and 9.0% influenza A(H1N1)pdm09), and 20 people were infected with influenza B (10.0%).

**Figure 9. Per cent of laboratory confirmed influenza, Australia, 1 January to 25 August 2019 by subtype and week.**



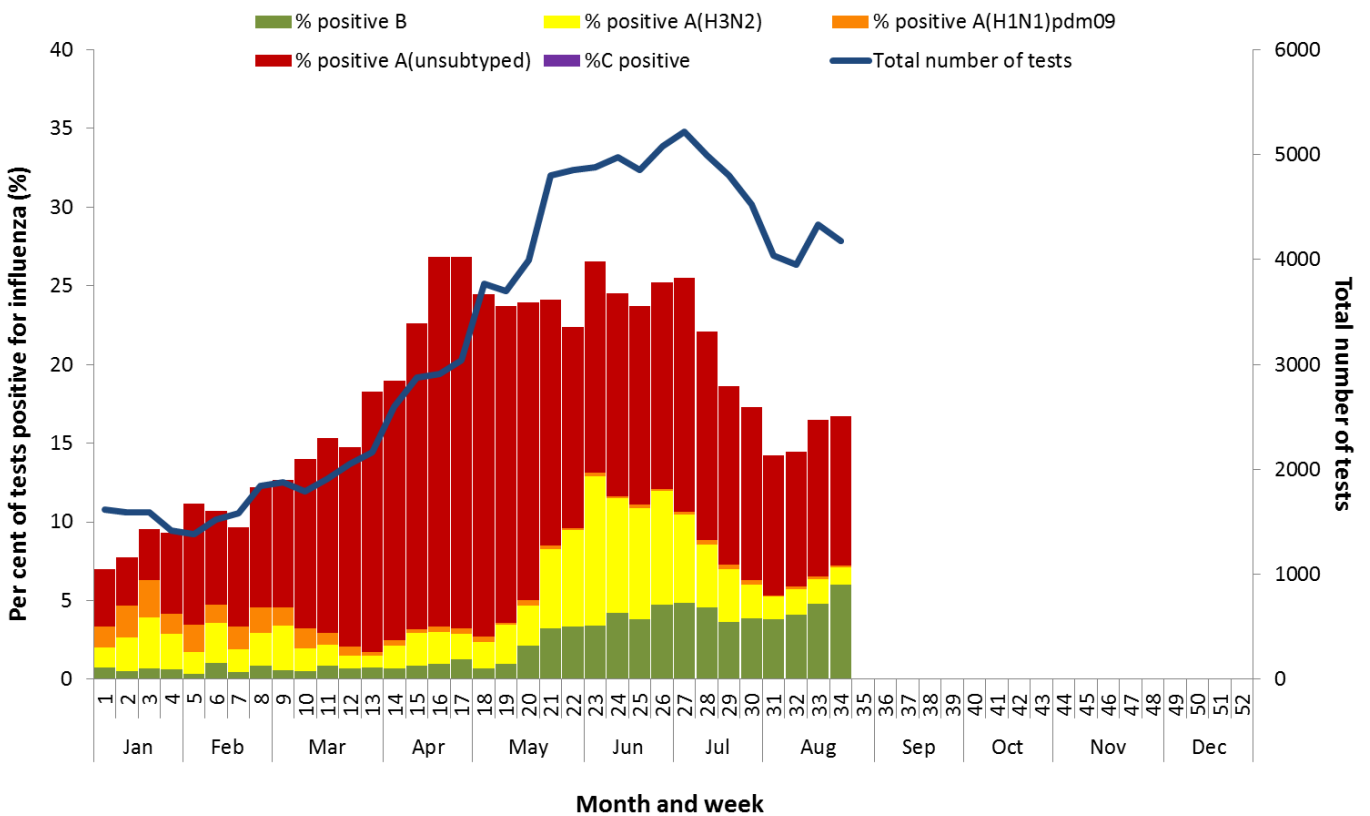
Source: NNDSS

**Figure 10. Per cent of notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza, Australia, 1 January to 25 August 2019, by subtype and state or territory.**

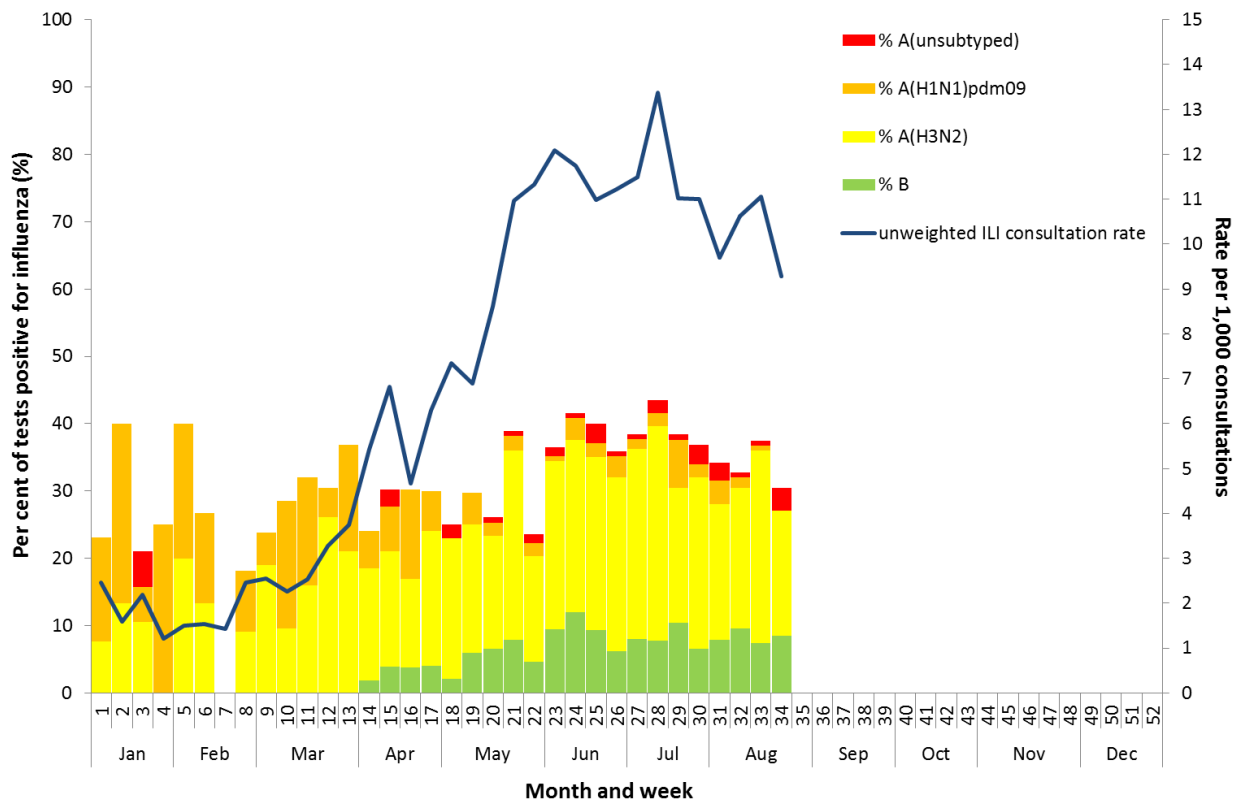


Source: NNDSS

**Figure 11. Proportion of sentinel laboratory tests positive for influenza and total number of specimens tested, 1 January to 25 August 2019, by subtype and month and week.**

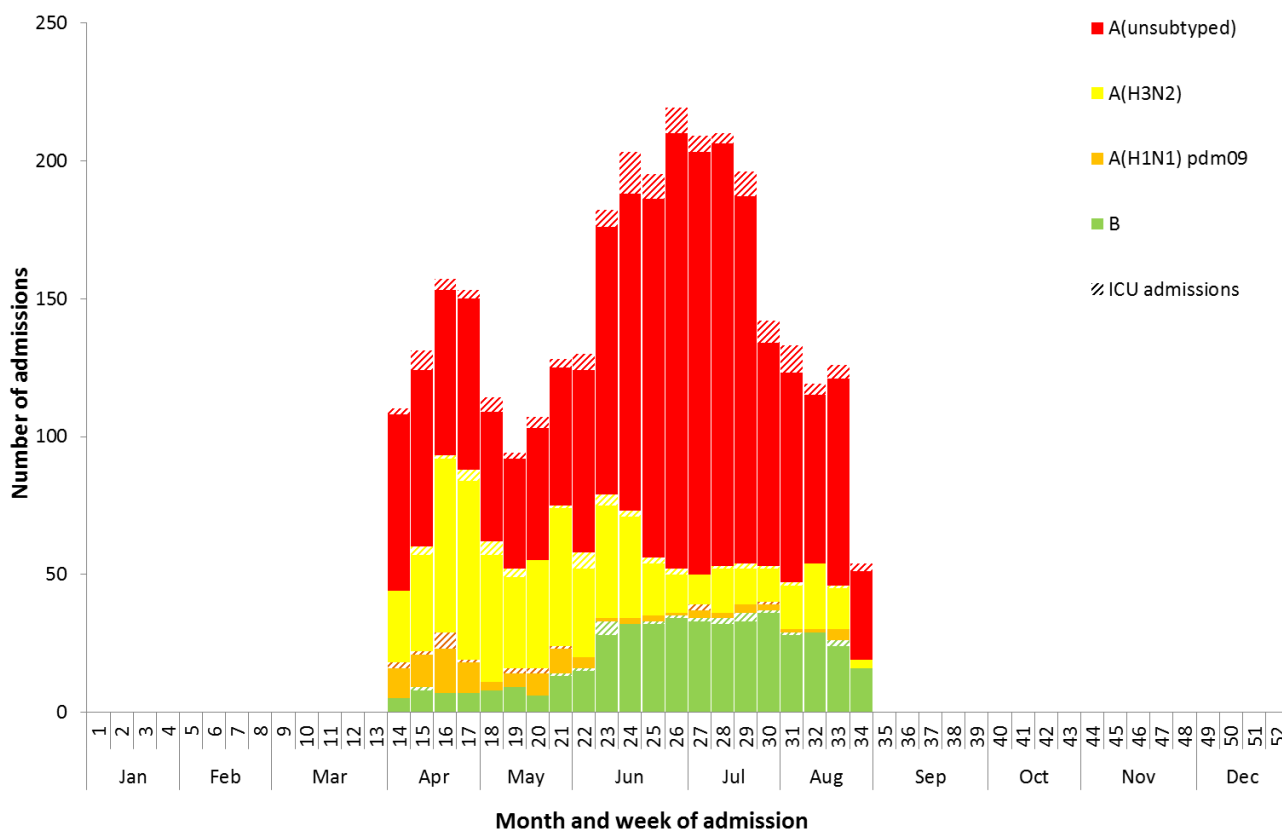


**Figure 12. Proportion of respiratory viral tests positive for influenza in ASPREN ILI patients and ASPREN ILI consultation rate, Australia, 1 January to 25 August 2019, by month and week.**



Source: ASPREN

**Figure 13. Number of influenza hospitalisations at sentinel hospitals by subtype and ICU admission, 1 April to 25 August 2019, by month and week.**



Source: FluCAN

## 5. At-risk Populations

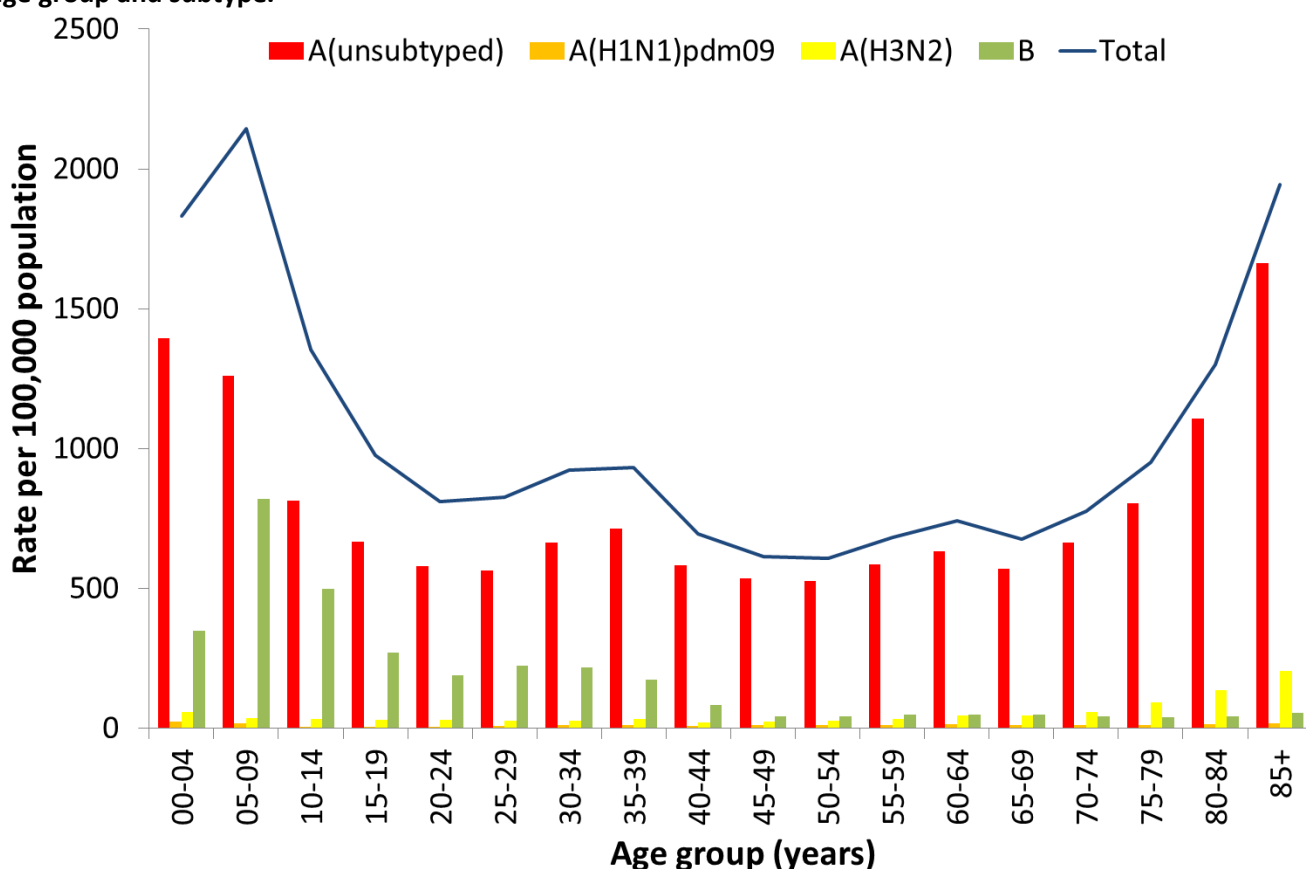
### National notification data

- **NNDSS:** In the year to date, notification rates were highest in children aged between 5 and 9 years of age (2,143.6 notifications per 100,000) followed by adults aged over 85 years (1,943.4 notifications per 100,000) (Figure 14).
- In the year to date, influenza A accounted for the greatest number of notifications across all age groups. Where further subtyping was available, notification rates of influenza A(H1N1)pdm09 were highest in children aged less than 4 years (23.3 notifications per 100,000) and notifications of influenza A(H3N2) were highest in adults aged 85 years and older (205.3 notifications per 100,000). Notification rates for influenza B were highest in children aged 5 to 9 years (820.4 notifications per 100,000).
- Among broader age groups, where subtyping information was available, influenza A (H3N2) was the predominant strain in all age groups. Influenza B was most common in those aged 5 to 19 years (Figure 15).
- In the past fortnight, notification rates were highest in children aged between 5 and 9 years (245.6 notifications per 100,000), followed by adults over 85 years of age (214.8 notifications per 100,000).
- In the past fortnight, influenza A has also accounted for the greatest number of notifications across all age groups, with rates according to subtypes mirroring those in the year to date.

### Sentinel hospital surveillance

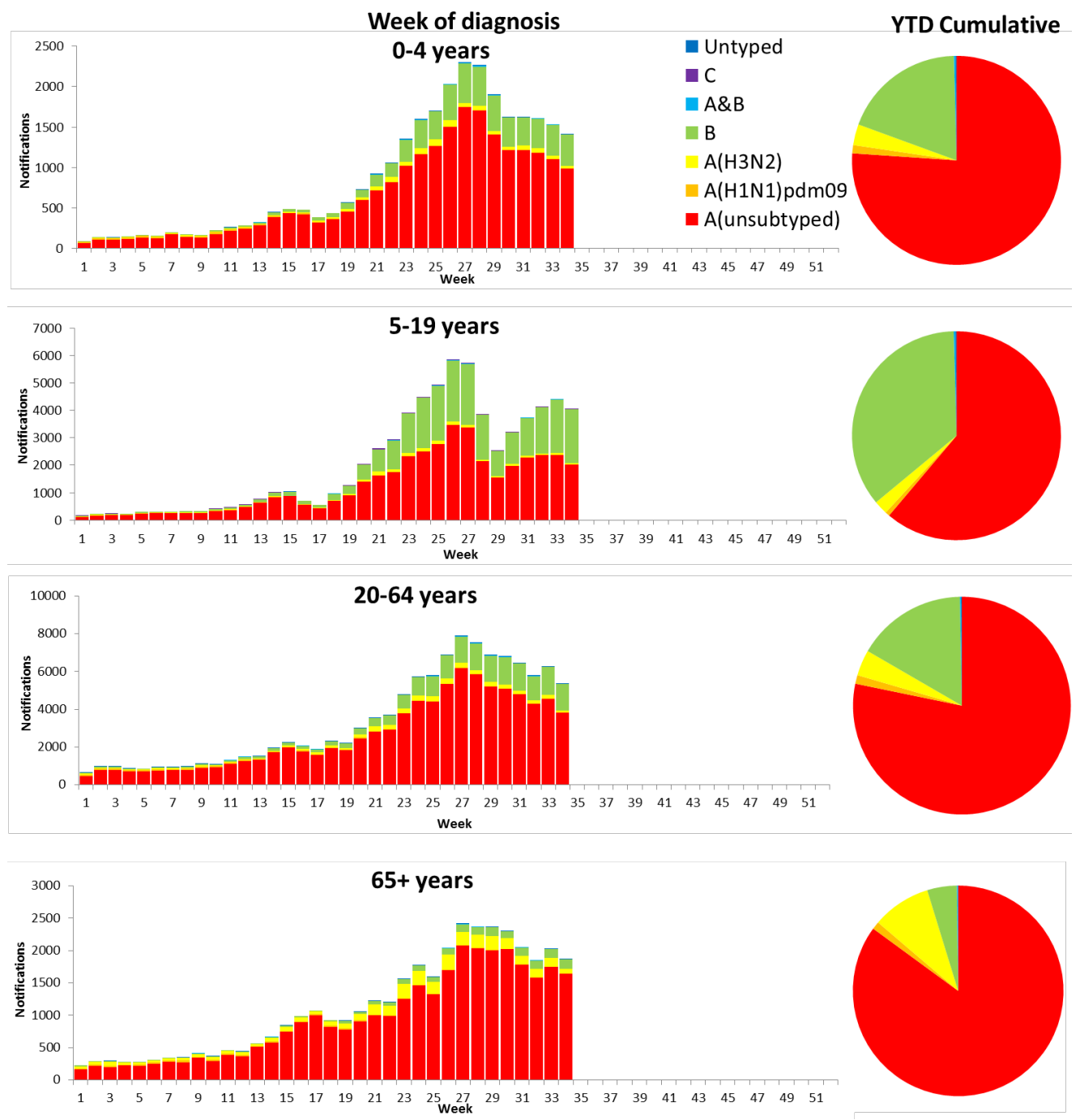
- **FluCAN:** Since seasonal sentinel hospital surveillance began on 1 April 2019, 30.3% of people admitted with confirmed influenza were children aged 15 years and younger, 30.8% were adults aged between 16 and 64 years, and 38.9% were adults aged 65 years and older. Of the children admitted with confirmed influenza to date, 5.3% (n=50) were admitted to ICU, compared to 8.8% of adults aged between 16 and 64 years and 5.4% of adults aged 65 years and older.

**Figure 14. Rate of notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza, Australia, 1 January to 25 August 2019, by age group and subtype.**



Source: NNDSS

**Figure 15. Notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza by week of diagnosis and cumulative year-to-date, Australia, 1 January to 25 August 2019, by age group and subtype**



Source: NNDSS

## 6. Vaccine effectiveness

### Australian Influenza Vaccines Composition 2019

The influenza virus strains included in the 2019 seasonal influenza vaccines in Australia are:

- A/Michigan/45/2015, (H1N1)pdm09-like virus;
- A/Switzerland/8060/2017, (H3N2)-like virus; and
- B/Phuket/3073/2013-like virus, Yamagata lineage.
- B/Colorado/06/2017-like virus, Victoria lineage.

The best way to determine how well the vaccine protects against circulating viruses during the season is by determining the vaccine effectiveness. These estimates provide an indication of how effective the vaccine was in providing protection against influenza infection. Vaccine effectiveness is usually estimated from observational studies and is calculated after the end of the influenza season, though interim analyses are

sometimes available where there is sufficient data. Antigenic characterisation, as presented below, provides an estimate of the match of circulating influenza viruses to components of the vaccines utilised in the 2019 influenza season.

### WHOCC

From 1 January to 26 August 2019, 1,281 isolates were characterised for similarity to their corresponding vaccine components by haemagglutination inhibition (HI) assay (Table 1). Most influenza A(H1N1)pdm09 viruses and influenza B/Yamagata viruses appeared to be antigenically similar to the corresponding vaccine components. Twenty-one A(H1N1)pdm09 and one B/Yamagata viruses were characterised as low reactors. The majority of influenza A(H3N2) and B/Victoria isolates that were able to be assessed by HI assay appeared to be antigenically matched to the vaccine. Of the 507 influenza A(H3N2) isolates, 97 were characterised as low reactors, and an additional 242 isolates were unable to be characterised in the HI assay due to insufficient haemagglutination titre. Of the 120 influenza B/Victoria isolates, 34 were characterised as low reactors.

**Table 1. Australian influenza viruses typed by HI from the WHOCC, 1 January to 26 August 2019.**

| Type/Subtype       | ACT        | NSW        | NT         | QLD        | SA         | TAS       | VIC        | WA        | TOTAL       |
|--------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-------------|
| A(H1N1) pdm09      | 67         | 194        | 48         | 66         | 87         | 12        | 127        | 27        | 628         |
| A(H3N2)            | 65         | 86         | 84         | 25         | 73         | 44        | 102        | 28        | 507         |
| B/Victoria lineage | 26         | 8          | 24         | 13         | 10         | 1         | 24         | 14        | 120         |
| B/Yamagata lineage | 4          | 6          | 2          | 1          | 9          | 0         | 1          | 3         | 26          |
| <b>Total</b>       | <b>162</b> | <b>294</b> | <b>158</b> | <b>105</b> | <b>179</b> | <b>57</b> | <b>254</b> | <b>72</b> | <b>1281</b> |

SOURCE: WHO CC

Note: Viruses tested by the WHO CC are not necessarily a random sample of all those in the community. State indicates the residential location for the individual tested, not the submitting laboratory. There may be up to a month delay on reporting of samples.

### Vaccine effectiveness

The protective effect of influenza vaccines against influenza and complications, known as vaccine effectiveness, is monitored by several sentinel influenza surveillance systems in Australia. This varies from season to season based on the match between the strains in the vaccine to circulating strains, but typically is around 40-60%. Overall in 2019, vaccine effectiveness appears good and as expected based on preliminary estimates from general practice (ASPREN) and sentinel hospitals (FluCAN-PAEDS).

## 7. Antiviral Resistance

The WHOCC reported that from 1 January to 26 August 2019, one of the 1,799 influenza viruses tested for neuraminidase inhibitor resistance, demonstrated highly reduced inhibition to Oseltamivir.

## 8. Data considerations

This report presents an overview of influenza activity based on a number of complimentary systems. No one single system, including notification data, provides the full picture on influenza, because influenza is a common disease and its presenting symptoms are non-specific. The epidemiology of influenza is informed by a number of different systems based in the community, laboratories, primary care and hospitals, as well as notifiable diseases data, which includes officially reported deaths. The information in this report is reliant on the surveillance sources available to the Department of Health at the time of production.

Data in this summary is reported by International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 8601 weeks, with the week ending on Sunday. Throughout the summary, where the year to date is presented, this includes data from 1 January to 25 August 2019. NNDSS data were extracted on 30 August 2019. Due to the dynamic nature of the NNDSS and other surveillance systems, data in this report are subject to retrospective revision and may vary from data reported in other national reports and reports by states and territories. Detailed notes on interpreting the data presented in this report are available at the Department of Health's [Australian Influenza Surveillance Report website](http://www.health.gov.au/flureport) (www.health.gov.au/flureport).

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