

Nearly 6,500 report flu symptoms across NC

Officials urge use of masks

By **BOB MONTGOMERY**
The Daily Advance

Some hospitals and nursing homes are "strongly" recommending that patients and visitors wear surgical masks to help control an early outbreak of the seasonal flu virus.

The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services reported 6,481 patients statewide have reported flu-like symptoms since early October, and 17 flu-related deaths, according to figures compiled through Jan. 5, released Thursday.

"It's the earliest onset of the seasonal flu we've seen in 10 years," said Mark Van Sciver, a state health department spokesman. "It's unusual."

The flu has reared its head in Edenton-Chowan. For the month of Decem-

ber Vidant Chowan Hospital reported 91 confirmed cases of the flu with 89 already reported by Jan. 11, according to Brian White, a hospital spokesman.

Fortunately, flu sickness among Edenton-Chowan Schools has not been as rampant. Michelle Maddox, schools' spokeswoman, said absences among students has been normal so far with each school recording about 25 absences per day for a myriad of illnesses and not all flu-related.

Although the flu season typically runs through April, this year health officials have seen a spike in flu cases much earlier. For the week ending Dec. 29, hospitals statewide reported 9.13 percent of all patient visits were related to the flu — about four times the national and regional average for that time period.

"This flu season does appear to be worse than the past two years and we



STAFF PHOTOS BY THOMAS J. TURNEY

Angela Lowe, an employee at Albemarle Hospital, in Elizabeth City, dons a surgical mask outside a hospital entrance, Friday. The hospital is encouraging patients, visitors and employees to wear masks to help prevent the spread of flu.

haven't yet hit the peak, which usually occurs in February," Albemarle Hospital emergency physician Samantha Furia said. "We have been seeing a dozen or more people a day in our emergency department

with flu-like symptoms or post-flu complications."

Hospitals in southeastern Virginia are reporting double the number of flu cases this season and an even higher rate — close to 15 percent of all new

patients have flu-like symptoms. Sentara Healthcare facilities have seen from 300 to 600 people each day seeking treatment for flu-related illnesses.

On Wednesday, Sentara and the region's other five health networks issued a rare joint statement "strongly" recommending that all patients and visitors wear a mask upon entering hospitals, freestanding emergency departments, urgent care centers and branch clinics. The masks are available at the entrances.

Van Sciver said North Carolina does not require hospitals to mandate masks be worn by visitors and patients, although hospitals can choose to do so on their own.

So far, Albemarle Hospital hasn't urged use of masks. Rather, staff are following "standard precautions — our normal infection prevention steps we take with every patient at all times," according to Bonnie Day Greene, the hospital's infection prevention specialist.

That means washing hands with a hand sanitizer each time they enter and leave a patient room, and wearing protective gloves if there is a potential for contact with bodily fluids.

"If a patient is suspected to have influenza, we implement droplet isolation precautions, which means anyone entering a room must wear a mask, and a patient must wear a mask if they need to be moved out of the room," Day Greene said.

Stands containing masks, tissues and hand sanitizer are at each hospital entrance, she said.

"We do ask that anyone who is not feeling well not come to the hospital to visit someone but are not restricting visitation at this time," she said.

Albemarle Regional Health Services, which represents 12 counties in northeastern North Carolina, asks patients who are coughing or sneezing to wear a mask when visiting clinics, but visitation is not restricted.

"Current rates are similar to what we see during flu season, which typically occurs in our area around January or February," said ARHS spokeswoman Ashley Stoop. "This increase in activity began in December. Fortunately, our rates are not as high as what we are seeing statewide, but these have not yet started to trend downward, so it is possible that we have not reached our true peak."

Meanwhile, local school nurses are not seeing any abnormal rises in absenteeism, according to Linwood Williams, superintendent of Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools.

"We are monitoring the situation and will continue to work closely with Albemarle Regional Health Services as always," he said. "We do recognize that flu season is upon us and encourage parents to

not send their children to school if they are sick or have a fever.

Officials say the truest way to measure the flu is through testing and diagnosis. Statewide there were 282 positive influenza results for the week ending Jan. 5, out of 501 patients who reported flu-like symptoms.

A person may have some of the symptoms, but not all. Symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches, chills and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea.

District-wide, Perquimans County Schools had an absenteeism rate of 7.5 percent on Jan. 2, with 135 students out of 1,798 absent. The rate slowly declined over the next seven school days to 4.4 percent on Friday, with 80 students out of 1,806 being out.

Meanwhile, area nursing homes are reporting no problems, although Sentara Nursing Center Currituck is following its parent company's guidelines "strongly encouraging" visitors to wear masks to protect the elderly residents, most of whom have had flu shots.

"Fortunately, we have no cases of flu here," said Julia Fretwell, Sentara Nursing Center Currituck administrator.

Brian Health Center and Rehab in Hertford, Chowan River Nursing and Rehab and Carolina House in Elizabeth City all reported no problems with the flu.

"Fortunately we do not have it now, knock on wood," a Carolina House employee said.

The good news is vaccines are efficient this year, and the supply put out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention matches the predominant strain circulating, the H3N2 Influenza A virus.

Van Sciver said some local doctor's offices and stores that offer the shot may need to re-order from time to time.

Walgreens in Elizabeth City ran out of vaccines on Wednesday, but a new batch was on the way. Todd's Pharmacy in Elizabeth City offers shots and has an adequate supply. Farm Fresh reported running low on supply and will need to re-order soon.

Pharmacists said people can call ahead to see if shots are available.

Stoops said it takes about two weeks for the flu vaccine to build antibodies in a person's system to offer full protection.

Nationwide, some areas seem to be worse than others. Earlier this week, Boston declared a public health emergency as Massachusetts reported 18 flu-related deaths so far. The city had 700 confirmed cases of the flu, compared to 70 of all last season. The CDC reported cases of flu in 47 states and the percentage of people going to the hospital for treatment of flu symptoms having doubled in the past month.

THE FREEZE

W. Queen St. **Restaurant** 482-2402
...the food is still the same! Soft Serve Ice Cream & ALL!

THIS WEEK'S SPECIALS

Bacon Cheese Burger Combo.....	\$5.59
Quarter lb Cheese Burger.....	\$5.19
BBQ Combo.....	\$4.79

Try Our Super Combo Meals & Chicken Specials

COMBO MEALS

BBQ Combo	\$5.09	Big T Combo	\$5.39
Double Cheeseburger Combo	\$5.39	Hot Sausage Combo	\$5.39
1/4 Pounder w/ Cheese Combo	\$5.39	Fish Combo	\$5.39
Bacon Cheeseburger Combo	\$5.79	Chicken Filet Combo	\$5.99
Pizza Burger Combo	\$5.79	Grilled Chicken Combo	\$5.99

ALL COMBO MEALS SERVED WITH MEDIUM DRINK & FRENCH FRIES.

CHICKEN

4 PIECE	\$5.25	2 PIECE SNACK	\$3.75
8 PIECE	\$9.95	2 PIECE SNACK COMBO	\$4.45
12 PIECE	\$14.95	CHICKEN DINNER	\$13.95

Includes small French Fry & Drink
8 piece Chicken, 2 large Fries, pint of coleslaw & 2 rolls

PLEASE CALL AHEAD OR ALLOW 18-25 MINUTE COOKING TIME

NOW ACCEPTING VISA, MC & DISCOVER
CALL FOR TAKE OUT (252) 482-2402

TOWN OF EDENTON GARBAGE COLLECTION MLK DAY SCHEDULE 2013



MONDAY, JANUARY 21ST
"HOLIDAY" NO COLLECTION

TUESDAY, JANUARY 22ND
EASTSIDE SOLID WASTE COLLECTION
WILL BE PICKED UP

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 23RD
RECYCLABLES WILL BE PICKED UP


THURSDAY - JANUARY 24TH
YARD WASTE WILL BE PICKED UP

FRIDAY, JANUARY 25TH
WESTSIDE SOLID WASTE COLLECTION WILL BE PICKED UP

COLLEGE OF THE ALBEMARLE 2012-2013 SEASON

the watercoolers.



Friday | January 18 | 7pm

\$20
\$25 AT DOOR

The Watercoolers is a clean musical comedy that takes a unique look at life, work, kids, husbands, wives, travel, technology, and trying to balance it all. This smart comedy features Broadway caliber actors with phenomenal vocals. It won the 2009 Spotlight Award and has received many rave reviews for its relatability and "brilliant writing."

This show is rated PG 13. Parents please accompany all children under 13 years.

PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
AT COLLEGE OF THE ALBEMARLE

1806 N. Road Street | Elizabeth City NC 27806

ALBEMARLE.EDU/PA
252-335-9400