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Healthy young adults face severe flu risk

WASHINGTON: Doctors are reporting a severe form of influenza A (H1N1) that goes straight to the lungs, causing severe illness in otherwise healthy young people and requiring expensive hospital treatment, the World Health Organisation said.

Some countries are reporting that as many as 15 per cent of patients infected with the new H1N1 pandemic virus need hospital care, further straining already overburdened healthcare systems, WHO said.

"During the winter season in the southern hemisphere, several countries have viewed the need for intensive care as the greatest burden on health services.

"Preparedness measures need to anticipate this increased demand on intensive care units, which could be overwhelmed by a sudden surge in the number of severe cases."

Earlier, WHO had reported that H1N1 had reached epidemic levels in Japan, signalling an early start to what may be a long influenza season this year, and that it was also

worsening in tropical regions.

"Perhaps most significantly, clinicians from around the world are reporting a very severe form of disease, also in young and otherwise healthy people, which is rarely seen during seasonal influenza infections.

"In these patients, the virus directly infects the lung, causing severe respiratory failure. Saving these lives depends on highly specialised and demanding care in intensive care units, usually with long and costly stays."

Minority groups and indigenous populations may also have a higher risk of being severely ill with H1N1.

"In some studies, the risk in these groups is four to five times higher than in the general population," WHO said.

"Although the reasons are not fully understood, possible explanations include lower standards of living and poor overall health status, including a high prevalence of conditions such as asthma, diabetes and hypertension."

The good news — HIV carriers do not seem to be at special risk from H1N1. — Reuters