

Respiratory diseases linked to seasonal flu claim thousands of lives every year – UN health agency

14 December 2017 – Respiratory diseases from seasonal influenza takes up to 650,000 lives annually, according to new estimates released Thursday by the United Nations health agency and global partners.

“These figures indicate the [high burden of influenza](#) and its substantial social and economic cost to the world,” Dr. Peter Salama, Executive Director of the World Health Organization’s ([WHO](#)) Health Emergencies Programme said on Thursday.

“They highlight the importance of influenza prevention for seasonal epidemics, as well as preparedness for pandemics,” he added.

This marks an increase of the previous global estimate of 250,000 – 500,000 from over ten years ago, which covered all influenza-related deaths, including cardiovascular disease or diabetes.

The new figures of 290,000 – 650,000 deaths are based on recent data from more diverse countries and exclude deaths from non-respiratory diseases. They consider findings from recent influenza respiratory mortality studies, including by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

According to CDC, most deaths occur among people aged over 75 years, and in the world’s poorest regions. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for the world’s greatest flu mortality risk, followed closely by the Eastern Mediterranean and Southeast Asia.

“All countries, rich and poor, large and small, must work together to control influenza outbreaks before the arrival of the next pandemic,” continued Dr. Salama. “This includes building capacity to detect and respond to outbreaks, and strengthening health systems to improve the health of the most vulnerable and those most at risk.”

Nearly all deaths among children under five with influenza-related lower respiratory tract infections occur in developing countries, but the effects of seasonal influenza epidemics on the world’s poorest are not fully known.

WHO is working with partners to measure the global influenza burden and its economic consequences, and to provide guidance and expertise to Member States.

Further surveillance and laboratory studies of other diseases, which can be influenza-related, are expected to yield substantially higher estimates over the next few years.

WHO encourages countries to prioritize influenza prevention and produce national estimates to inform prevention policies.