This year’s atypical flu season puts children at greater risk

BY TUCKER DOHERTY, POLITICO PRO DATAPPOINT

According to the latest estimates from CDC, this year’s flu season is mild overall but may be affecting young children more than usual due to an unusual variant of the virus circulating this year. For the first time since 1993, the “type B” flu virus—which is associated with higher pediatric mortality—is the predominant strain. Thus far, CDC estimates that between 4,800 and 12,000 flu-related deaths have occurred since October. This is well below the pace set by the record-breaking 2017-18 flu season, which resulted in an estimated 80,000 deaths.

Researchers say this year’s vaccine is 58 percent effective against the predominant strain—an improvement over the last two years. Because the most prevalent flu strain varies from year to year, public health authorities can only make an educated guess to formulate each year’s vaccine. In September, President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing HHS to overhaul seasonal flu vaccine production, with an emphasis on faster production methods.

Less common strain of flu driving uptick in pediatric deaths

Cumulative flu-associated pediatric deaths during initial 14 weeks of season, by strain

According to a preliminary CDC estimate, 80,000 people died of the flu and related complications during the 2017-18 season, the highest toll in decades.

Sources: CDC, "Weekly U.S. Influenza Surveillance Report"; Lena H. Sun, "Unusual flu virus is hitting children hard, and this season’s vaccine is a poor match," The Washington Post