Flu season kicks off early, strong

By Allison Horton
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The flu is back with a vengeance this year, earlier than usual and affecting more people this winter.

“Loyola documented several cases of the flu before Thanksgiving,” says Dr. Jorge Parada, medical director of the infection prevention and control program at Loyola University Health System. “It is early to start and also a high number.”

There were 27 reported influenza cases at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood so far this year, which is a sharp increase from last year when the first flu case wasn’t reported until December.

It is unclear if the worst is yet to come, Parada said, but the flu season usually peaks in mid-February and lasts until April. Flu season can begin as early as October, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

“We can’t tell if it is a really bad flu season or an early flu season,” Parada said. “But it is sexier to get a flu shot than not have one and get the flu on Valentine’s Day.”

It is not too late to receive the flu vaccine, which usually takes two weeks to take full effect, said Dr. Allison Bartlett, of the pediatric infectious disease department of the University of Chicago Medical Center.

Except for those with a severe allergic reaction to eggs or the influenza vaccine, the CDC recommends people older than six months be vaccinated annually.

Since Nov. 5, the University of Chicago has had 24 reported influenza cases, a significant jump from last year when the first flu case wasn’t reported until Jan. 12. Only 43 cases were reported at the hospital from July 2011 through May 2012.

Rush University Medical Center also is noticing a surprising number of reported flu cases this year, spokeswoman Cassandra Cirra said. Since Nov. 15, there have been 36 reported cases compared to last year when there were no reported cases.
Flu cases are also on the rise at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, which has admitted 39 influenza patients since Sept. 1 compared with only one reported case at this time last year, said hospital spokeswoman Megan McCann.