

PUBLIC HEALTH

'Flu Epidemic Doubted

Military stations have been alerted to inform Washington concerning an outbreak of respiratory diseases. There has been no proved epidemic of 'flu since last August.

► WE MAY get through this winter without a big epidemic of influenza.

It is still early to be sure about this, but occasionally we do have years with little or no influenza. And it can be said, on the basis of reports to authorities in Washington, that so far there has been no epidemic influenza in this country. Nor has there been any proved influenza epidemic anywhere around the world since last August when an outbreak of influenza B was reported in Australia.

Best places to pick up first signs of the start of an influenza epidemic are installations of the Armed Forces. This is because such close watch is kept over the health of the servicemen and women.

Army, Navy and Air Force medical officers at stations in the United States are under orders to report to the Surgeons General in Washington by telegram any outbreak of any respiratory disease, which includes influenza and influenza-like sicknesses. They are also required to take blood samples for tests to confirm diagnosis.

Among civilians, many never call a doctor when sick with influenza, and most cases, even when seen by physicians, are diagnosed on the basis of symptoms without confirming blood tests.

So far, although some 500 blood samples have been examined by Army, Navy and Air Force medical men, only two or three were positive for influenza and no two of those were in one place. None of these were in stations where respiratory outbreaks had occurred, and no influenza virus was isolated.

One state, and only one so far as is known, makes regular checks to pick up first signs of a 'flu outbreak among civilians. This is California which has about a dozen "listening posts" over the state. Scientists at these posts watch for increased absenteeism among school children and at industrial plants. They try each week to get blood samples to test for increase in influenza-fighting antibodies, which would indicate a 'flu virus had been around.

So far, only one of at least 150 civilians tested showed any antibody rise. No virus was found in this case.

Predictions about influenza are always risky. Sometimes an epidemic of 'flu is upon us before we know it. Only later, after checking over reports, health authorities realize that it had started without the first signs being recognized.

Influenza epidemics have occurred in the United States as early as November and as late as March or April. Last winter's outbreak started in December. The year before, 'flu broke out in Europe in Decem-

ber and reached epidemic proportions here at the end of January.

What will happen by the end of January this year is still anybody's guess, but the signs now are hopeful.

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ORNITHOLOGY

Riced Suet Pleases Birds as Winter Food

► AN OLD tried-and-tested bird food, suet, in a form that looks like kernels of cooked rice is being used at the Cornell Bird Feeding Station, Ithaca, N. Y.

As a part of the study on the food habits of birds, Prof. A. A. Allen, Cornell University ornithologist, processed suet through a meat grinder and made it look like cooked rice.

It took only two days for this food to become more popular than even sunflower seeds. Since suet is plentiful now and the price is low, the Cornell ornithologists suggest it is worth trying this new way of serving it.

Because birds are creatures of habit, Prof. Paul P. Kellogg of Cornell warns that in

other localities birds may not readily accept this new form of an old food.

Cornell ornithologists have found that many birds in one locality have learned to like dried raisins, but 50 miles away this choice and expensive bird food goes begging. Sometimes it requires a long period of training before a new food is accepted.

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MEDICINE

New Drug Treats Petit Mal Epilepsy

► DOCTORS NOW have a new drug for treating patients with petit mal epilepsy. The drug is a succinimide chemical which its manufacturers, Parke, Davis and Company of Detroit, have tradenamed Milontin.

Trial in 1,000 cases in the United States and England showed it gives complete control in 10%, practical control in 40% and no benefit in 50%, Dr. Elwood A. Sharp, director of clinical investigation for the firm, has reported.

Lack of toxic effects, such as drowsiness, nausea and vertigo are among the advantages of the drug. It was developed by a chemical-biological team composed of L. M. Long, G. M. Chen and C. A. Miller.

Petit mal epilepsy though not producing the marked and severe convulsions of grand mal epilepsy, is nevertheless disabling, since it may strike as many as 100 times a day.

It is more prevalent in children than the grand mal form and if not checked may lead to behavior problems or the child may eventually show mixed forms of epilepsy.

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GERM-FREE STUDIES—Drs. Morris Wagner (left) and Philip Trexler of Notre Dame's Lobund Institute examine a rat living a germ-free existence. Fed sterilized diets, the animals showed no tooth decay. (See SNL, Jan. 9, p. 19.)