

# Flu cases dropping steadily, states health department

By JASON MISNER  
The Champion

Influenza A continues to loosen its grip on Halton as the region heads into the final few weeks of what's been a long and grueling flu season.

As of Friday, a total of 213 lab-confirmed flu cases had been reported to Halton Region's health department, resulting in nine deaths — one child and the rest seniors. The same time last year, two dozen cases had been reported and resulted in no deaths.

Mary Anne Carson, manager of Halton's communicable disease program, said cases have been dropping steadily since the beginning of the year, bringing some relief to health staff that have been swamped with monitoring the virulent virus.

"We are seeing a significant downturn in the number of flu cases being reported to us," she said. "We saw the downturn in January, and again in February we're seeing fewer cases."

The flu season usually starts in November and ends around the end of March.

Earlier this winter season it was easy to think influenza cases would never stop piling up. In December alone, 167 flu cases were reported, up more than 600 per cent the previous December.

Thirty one cases were reported last month and one so far this month.

"It's the same pattern we're seeing in other jurisdictions in Ontario affected by influenza," Ms Carson said.

As of the week of February 2, the most recent numbers available, the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care had 5,308 flu cases reported, resulting in 251 deaths. Last winter, the Province had 913 flu cases.

Even though cases are dropping, Ms Carson said the Region is staying alert for the flu. It's not uncommon to see cases appear later in the winter season, so health-care professionals are being urged to assess whether a sick person may have contracted influenza.

Ms Carson said this year's flu has been dominated by the A Fujian strain, which wasn't included in this winter season's flu vaccine. The flu also arrived earlier

this year than in the past.

But thankfully the vaccine offers some cross-protection from A Fujian. And Ms Carson said residents have been vigilant in getting a flu shot, doing their part to help limit the flu's impact on the community. It's likely flu shots have also played a role in reducing the severity of the illness had a person contracted the flu, she said.

As of about two weeks ago, a total of 165,000 free flu shots in Halton had been administered, including those from the Region, hospitals and family physicians. That's way up from last year's total of 128,700.

Given the flu arrived earlier this year and in a stronger form, Ms Carson — stressing it's difficult to predict when a flu season will arrive — hopes the public will remember this next winter.

"When immunizations become available, the public should take advantage of that opportunity," she said, noting regional flu clinics started in late October.

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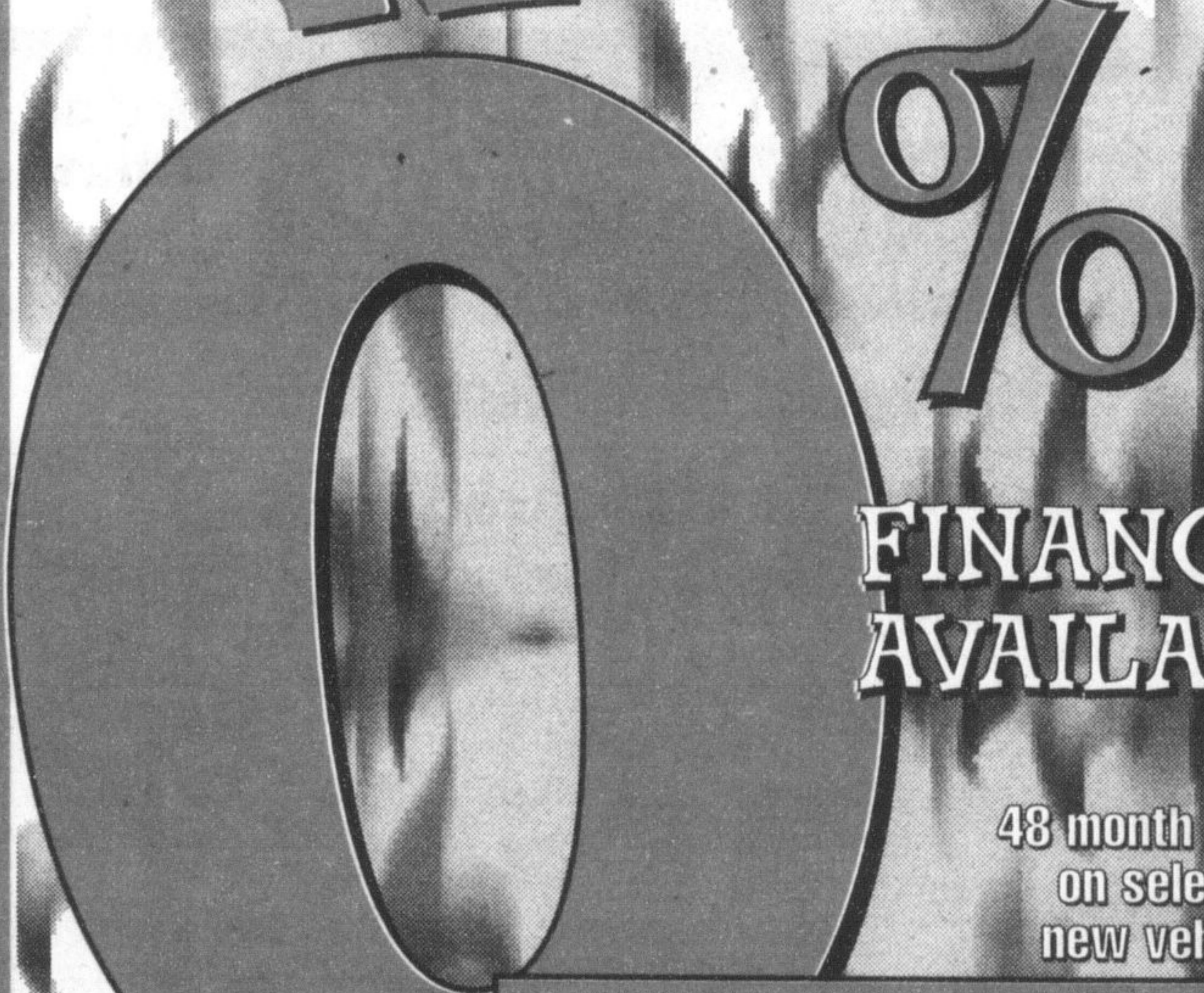
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