

Madison and Dane County Public Health: Protect against the flu: get the flu vaccine now

Posted on Monday, Oct 1, 2018

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Contact: Sarah Mattes, (608) 243-0482, communications@publichealthmdc.com

Now is the time to plan to get your flu vaccine. Public Health Madison & Dane County (PHMDC) recommends that everyone older than 6 months get the flu vaccine to protect throughout the flu season, which can last through spring.

“We don’t want a flu season like last year,” says Diane McHugh, Immunization Coordinator for PHMDC. “Last year was particularly severe. Excluding pandemics, we had record breaking flu-related hospitalizations in Dane County (695) and nationally (30,453). According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), there was also record breaking number of flu-related child deaths (180) in the United States. Approximately 80% of these deaths occurred in children who had not received a flu vaccination.”

“Get the flu vaccine before it starts spreading in the community. The exact timing and how long the flu season lasts can vary, but influenza activity can begin in October. It takes about 2 weeks to get full protection after the flu vaccine is given, so getting the vaccine, preferably in October, is the best thing you can do to protect yourself and others from getting the flu,” added McHugh.

For those with health insurance, flu vaccine is now readily available at local clinics, and also at area pharmacies. For those without health insurance, PHMDC can help. Free flu shots are offered by appointment for adults without health insurance, and for children without health insurance or who have Medical Assistance/Forward card. To schedule an appointment, call (608) 266-4821.

“Be sure to ask your provider which vaccine is best for you,” says McHugh. “Some flu vaccines are available for adults 65 and older who have weaker immune systems. The nasal spray flu is approved for use this year, but with very limited availability, so most people will need to get the shot.”

“Flu vaccine is safe and effective,” says McHugh. “Even when it is not 100% effective at preventing flu, it may reduce how sick you’ll get and reduce your chance of being hospitalized. When you get your flu shot, you’re also helping to reduce the amount of illness in our community, which helps protect the folks who can’t get a flu shot, like babies younger than 6 months old.”

McHugh further advises that, “If you take care of others, working with children or in health care, or you care for a spouse, parent or child with special needs, the flu shot is especially important for you. Stay healthy for them, and reduce sick time for yourself.”

The flu is not a stomach bug. Influenza causes high fever, cough, sore throat, body aches and oftentimes many days of missed work or school. It can be very serious leading to hospitalization and even death. Young children, pregnant women, people 65 years and older and people with certain medical conditions, like asthma, diabetes or heart disease are particularly vulnerable to the flu and complications of the illness. Complications include pneumonia, sinus and ear infections, inflammation of the heart or brain, and worsening chronic conditions.

While the vaccine is the best protection against getting the flu, there are other precautions people can take to stay healthy and prevent the spread of flu:

- Wash hands often, and for at least 20 seconds, with soap and water. Use alcohol-based hand rub if soap and water aren’t available.
- Cover the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid touching the eyes, nose or mouth. Every time you touch your face, you have a change of introducing germs.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Frequently disinfect surfaces at home, work or school that are touched regularly.
- Stay home when sick and take flu antiviral drugs if prescribed by a doctor.

For more information about the flu, see <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/>

For more information about flu shots from PHMDC,
see <http://www.publichealthmdc.com/disease/immunizations/influenza.cfm>