

Public Health of Madison and Dane County: Safe and effective, now is the time for flu vaccination

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Now is the time to get vaccinated against the flu. Public Health Madison & Dane County recommends that everyone older than 6 months get the flu vaccine now, to protect throughout the flu season, which can begin as early as October and last through spring.

“It’s important to get the flu vaccine before flu starts spreading in the community. It takes about 2 weeks to get full protection after the vaccine is given, so getting vaccinated, preferably in October, is the best thing you can do to protect yourself and others from getting the flu,” says Public Health Immunization Coordinator Sarah Hughes.

There is no way to predict how severe a flu season will be. Last flu season 223 people were hospitalized due to the flu in Dane County, and in the previous season, there were 695 hospitalizations.

“Flu vaccine is safe and effective,” says Hughes. “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 vaccine, 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.”

For those with health insurance, flu vaccine is now readily available at local clinics and pharmacies. For those without health insurance, Public Health 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 Hughes. “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.”

Hughes further advises that, “If your work involves taking care of others, like children or patients, or you care for a spouse, parent or child with special needs, the flu shot is especially important for you. Stay healthy to protect them, and reduce sick time for yourself.”

The flu is not a stomach bug. The flu causes high fever, cough, sore throat, body aches and oftentimes multiple 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 chance 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.