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NEWS RELEASE

Protect Against Influenza

Every winter, influenza continues to be one of the season's leading health problems. New Yorkers need to know what to do to protect themselves against this potentially fatal illness.

In any given year, between 5 and 20 percent of all New Yorkers will come down with influenza, commonly known as flu. In a typical year, more than 200,000 Americans are admitted to hospitals because of the flu, and, on average, about 36,000 people die. But the good news is that influenza is often preventable.

"Influenza is a contagious disease caused by a virus. It attacks the nose, throat and lungs. There is a vaccine available that can greatly reduce your chances of coming down with the flu," said Diane Cusworth of the Otsego County Department of Health.

"People over 50 years of age, people of any age with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women and very young children are more likely to get complications from the flu," she said.

"Pneumonia, bronchitis, and ear infections are typical complications from the flu. The flu can make chronic health problems worse. For example, people with asthma may have asthma attacks while they have the flu. People with chronic heart or lung problems may experience a worsening of their condition," she said.

The best time to get the flu vaccine is in October, November or December, to have protection before the flu season peaks – most often in February. But the season can peak any time from December through March. Therefore, it is highly recommended to get the flu vaccine even after January if you haven't done so.

Two kinds of flu vaccine are available. As in past years, an "inactivated" influenza vaccine will be given as a shot, commonly known as the "flu shot." Inactivated means that the vaccine uses a virus which has been killed, so there is no risk of getting the flu from the flu shot.

A nasal spray called "FluMist" is a new influenza vaccine that has been recently introduced. This vaccine uses a live, weakened virus. The virus is weakened and there is no risk of getting the flu from the nasal spray.

The nasal spray vaccine is approved for healthy people from 5 to 49 years of age. It should not be used by pregnant women; people with heart, lung or kidney disease; people with a weakened immune system; or people on long-term aspirin treatment.

“Because very young children are at increased risk for being hospitalized with the flu, an annual flu shot is recommended for all children six-months to four-years-old, as well as the caretakers and family members of children under five. People who work in health care settings should get a flu vaccine every year to protect not only themselves, but their patients and families as well. Even with mild or no symptoms, they might spread influenza to patients.

People with long-term health problems, pregnant women, children on long-term aspirin treatment, and residents of long term care facilities should get a flu shot every year. People who provide essential community services, or who live in dormitories or in crowded conditions should also consider getting the vaccine

“As important as it is for you to be vaccinated against flu each year, it may be even more important for health care professionals. The New York State Department of Health recommends flu vaccinations for all health care professionals to help prevent the spread of flu,” she said.

“If your health care provider or their staff becomes infected, they can spread the flu for up to two days before symptoms appear. Ask your health care providers if they received a flu shot or the flu nasal spray this year. Remind them that it’s their job to protect your health by practicing this important safeguard.” she said.

For more information on influenza and on the current flu season, call the Otsego County Department of Health at 607-547-4230, or visit the New York State influenza web site at www.flu.state.ny.us.