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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. Each year an estimated 2,500 New York residents die of influenza, representing about 7% of the total U.S. influenza deaths. During the 2007 – 2008 influenza season New York State had 8 pediatric deaths. 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 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.

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.

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 also available. 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 2 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.

Beginning with the 2008-09 influenza season, annual vaccination of all children aged 5 – 18 years is recommended, 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.

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.

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.