

Make This New Year a Flu-free Year

January traditionally is a month for establishing personal resolutions. Hopefully, your declarations for 2008 include good health for yourself, family and friends. One of the easiest and most effective ways to ensure this goal is to get a flu shot and encourage others to do the same. The CDC reports that this year's national flu vaccine supply is plentiful, and El Paso County is keeping pace with over 120,000 vaccine doses received to date.

You probably have heard the statistics before but they bear repeating: Every year in the United States, flu/influenza leads to approximately 200,000 hospitalizations and 36,000 deaths. During the 2006-2007 flu season, 367 influenza cases—involving hospitalizations or pediatric deaths—were reported in Colorado, including 26 cases in El Paso County. Young children and the elderly are especially vulnerable to this respiratory virus, which is spread person-to-person through coughs and sneezes of infected individuals or touching contaminated surfaces. The flu typically is accompanied by fever, headache, body aches, extreme fatigue, cough and sore throat. Children also may experience vomiting or diarrhea.

The severity and longevity of any given flu season are unpredictable, but the season usually extends from October to May—peaking in the months of January or February. This season's first hospitalized flu case in El Paso County occurred in late November 2007, more than a month earlier than last season's initial case. The bottom line is that flu has arrived in our county and we are entering the "heavy season" for infections, statistically speaking. Anyone is at risk of infection and flu is contagious, so avoid becoming a statistic by getting vaccinated. Also keep in mind that the flu vaccine takes about two weeks to reach full potency but provides season-long protection.

The flu vaccine is recommended for anyone over the age of 6 months who wishes to reduce their risk of illness, especially for the following high-risk populations:

- Children ages 6 months through 4 years.
- Children and adults with chronic health conditions such as heart, lung or kidney disease, or weakened immune systems.
- Adults ages 50 and older.
- Pregnant women.
- Health care workers.
- Those who work or live with high-risk individuals—particularly households and care providers for children under 5 years of age.

In addition to getting a flu shot, there are several other prevention measures you can take to protect yourself from the flu this season, including:

- **Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently.** The CDC stresses that proper hand washing is a primary way to prevent the spread of disease, including the flu. Use warm water, soap and clean towels. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers also are effective, but soap and water are preferred when hands are visibly soiled.
- **Cover your cough.** When you sneeze or cough, cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or sneeze into your shirt sleeve—not your hands. Put used tissues in the waste basket and then wash yours hands.
- **Stay home if you are sick and encourage others to do the same.** Isolation is an important way to stop the spread of disease when you are sick. Stay home from work, school and other activities until you are well. Also keep your distance from others while sick, and avoid people who appear sick. Remember that flu can be contagious a day before symptoms appear and for several days after the onset of illness.

On behalf of the El Paso County Department of Health and Environment, I wish you and yours a happy and healthy New Year!

For additional information on seasonal flu, prevention measures and local vaccine clinics, access:

- El Paso County Department of Health and Environment website:
www.elpasocountyhealth.org
- Colorado Influenza and Pneumococccal Alert Coalition (CIPAC) website:
www.immunizecolorado.com
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment toll-free Helpline:
(877) 462-2911

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