

Flu Season Is Inevitable, So Flu Shots Are Essential

Whether you live in the heart of Colorado Springs or on the fringes of El Paso County, the flu virus knows no boundaries. In fact, you might think of the flu as an equal opportunity infector—just waiting to enter unvaccinated individuals and wreak havoc on their bodies. Annually in the United States, nearly 200,000 people are hospitalized and 36,000 people die from flu-related causes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continues to stress that flu shots offer the best protection from getting infected with flu and suffering from flu complications that can lead to hospitalization and possibly death. CDC is reporting that flu vaccine will be plentiful during the 2008-09 flu season, so everyone who wants optimal protection from flu infection should get their flu shot. The flu vaccine takes about 2 weeks to reach full immunity and offers season-long protection for immunized individuals.

El Paso County's 2007-08 Flu Season in Review

Let me provide a snapshot of flu activity in El Paso County last flu season that illustrates just how severe flu can be. During the 2007-08 flu season, El Paso County saw more hospitalized flu cases than any of the previous 4 seasons. Our county also reported the highest number and rate of hospitalized flu cases compared to all Colorado counties, including Denver. Further analysis of local hospitalized cases during 2007-08 revealed:

- Nearly 10% of cases occurred in children under 6 months of age, who are not eligible for flu vaccinations.
- About 30% of cases were children ages 6 months to 18 years.
- Almost 35% of cases represented adults 60 years and older.

Despite last season's heavy flu activity in El Paso County, current Colorado immunization data shows that only 1 in 3 children under 2 years of age are vaccinated for the flu, and less than half of adults with high-risk medical conditions get a flu shot. What this means is that two of our community's most vulnerable age groups for flu infection are significantly under-immunized—an inviting formula for potentially-fatal flu infections.

Changes to 2008-09 Flu Vaccine and Expanded Age Recommendations

Globally, flu activity varies from one season to the next. That is why federal health officials continuously monitor flu patterns in areas of the world where the virus already has circulated to help identify the most probable flu types that the U.S. will encounter during the next flu season.

The make-up of the flu vaccine for 2007-08 has been completely changed from last season, and public health officials are optimistic that the vaccine will be very effective in protecting persons against infection. The CDC now is recommending the flu vaccine for all children ages 6 months to 18 years, along with adults over 50 years old, pregnant women, individuals with weakened immune systems or chronic health conditions, and care providers for at-risk groups.

Additional Flu Prevention Tips and Local Flu Shot Clinics

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 15 seconds.
- Avoid contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Visit www.elpasocountyhealth.org for additional flu information and hand-washing resources.
- To access listings of local flu shot clinics, visit the Colorado Influenza and Pneumococcal Alert Coalition (CIPAC) Web site at www.immunizecolorado.com or call toll-free: 1-877-462-2911

On behalf of your Health Department, have a safe, healthy and happy fall.

Publication: The New Falcon Herald, October 18, 2008