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Public health officials promote influenza vaccinations

With the advent of flu season, Oregon public health officials are urging influenza vaccinations for anyone who wants to avoid getting sick with the respiratory virus. Officials of the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division point to a plentiful supply of influenza vaccine.

"We expect a record amount of flu vaccine this year," said Dr. Paul Cieslak, medical director of the Health Division's Oregon Immunization Program. "There should be enough to immunize everyone who wants to avoid getting sick. And just as important, you should get vaccinated to protect the people you care about, especially if you're in close contact with someone in a high-risk group."

Every year, an average of 450 Oregonians die from influenza. An estimated 36,000 die in the United States. During the 2007-2008 flu season, 86 children in the United States died from influenza-related complications, prompting the CDC to release a video that features the personal stories of parents who have tragically lost or nearly lost a child to the flu. See the video at: www.youtube.com/user/cdcflu. The CDC has put up a Flu Season Web site for the public, employers, and healthcare providers at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu>.

In addition to the many deaths caused by influenza, countless others will miss work or school, incur medical costs, have complications of chronic disease due to influenza infections and give up many hours of healthy life to the misery of flu. Annual influenza vaccinations are especially important for people who are at high risk of complications from influenza:

- Children ages 6 months through 18 years;
- Pregnant women or new parents;
- People 50 years of age and older;

- People of any age with chronic medical conditions;
- People who live or work in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities;
- People who live with, or care for, people at high risk of complications;
- Health care workers.

Getting a flu vaccination every year is the best way to prevent spreading the disease and its potentially severe complications. Children less than 6 months of age are too young to receive a vaccine, so parents should make sure that family and close contacts are vaccinated.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that children aged 6 months to 19 years of age get a flu vaccine every fall or winter. Children up to age 9 getting a flu vaccine for the first time need two doses, separated by at least four weeks. A single dose is required for children 9 to 18 years of age. Influenza is characterized by abrupt onset of high fever, headache, sore throat, cough, muscle aches, and can be spread for up to 10 days, even before the onset of symptoms. Unlike other common respiratory illnesses, which also tend to circulate during the winter months, flu is associated with fever, extreme fatigue, and loss of appetite lasting several days. Influenza can also lead to pneumonia, ear infections, complications of the diabetic insulin cycle, and complications of asthma or other lung diseases.

Healthy persons 2 through 49 years old can now choose FluMist, a nasal flu vaccination instead of an injection. Those who are pregnant or have certain medical conditions should not get the nasal spray but can still get the injected flu vaccine. See your medical provider or local health department to be vaccinated. In Oregon, many local pharmacies offer influenza vaccinations (for persons 15 years and up). You may also call 800-SAFENET (783-3638) to find a clinic in your area or on the Web at <http://flucliniclocator.org/>.

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