



Date: February 23, 2009

General questions: Patrick O'Neill, DHS, (971) 673-1282

Technical questions: Dr. Ann Thomas, M.D., (971) 673-1111

Oregon health officials see rise in flu cases

Influenza has arrived in full force in Oregon and state health officials are urging anyone who wants to avoid the illness to get vaccinated. Oregon medical laboratories have reported marked increases over the last few weeks in the number of positive flu specimens they've identified.

Medical offices around the state that routinely report the level of influenza activity in their practices first reported epidemic levels of flu transmission during the last week of January. The numbers have been rising steadily in the last three weeks.

"Given that in three of the last four years influenza activity has peaked in either the last week in February or the first week in March in Oregon, I would not be surprised to see the numbers continue to climb over the next few weeks," said Dr. Ann Thomas, M.D., a public health physician with the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division who oversees influenza activity for the state.

Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report a good match between the circulating strains of influenza A and the two strains contained in this year's vaccine. The strain of influenza B in this year's vaccine does not match as well but that strain accounts for only 20 percent of influenza cases nationally and in Oregon.

The influenza vaccine is known to provide some cross-protection against strains not contained in the vaccine, often reducing the severity of illness.

With the flu season is heating up, Thomas urges people who haven't gotten flu shots to do so.

“The flu vaccine only takes two weeks to start working and we have a good match this year,” she said. “I would still encourage people to get a flu shot if they have not already gotten one. It’s not too late, and the vaccine is still the most effective way to prevent the flu.”

Vaccination is recommended for anyone who wants to avoid being sick from flu, especially those who are at high risk of complications from influenza or are in close contact with those at high risk. Priority groups for vaccination are:

- Children aged 6 months to 18 years,
- Pregnant women,
- People 50 years of age and older,
- People of any age with chronic medical conditions,
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities,
- People who live with or care for people at high risk of complications, such as household contacts, out-of-home caregivers of children six months and younger,
- Healthcare workers,
- School-age children.

Symptoms of influenza, which is caused by a virus, include fever, headache, sore throat, cough and muscle aches. Unlike common colds it can cause extreme fatigue and loss of appetite lasting several days.

It is estimated that almost 450 Oregonians die of influenza every year; nationally flu kills an estimated 36,000 people every year.

Information on clinic locations and dates can be obtained by calling 1-800-SAFENET or at the or at the American Lung Association of Oregon’s Flu Shot Locator Web site: www.lungoregon.org/asthma/Flu_Shot_Locator.html.

Most insurance plans will cover influenza vaccine, and community clinics providing no cost vaccine can be found by calling the Oregon SafeNet number above.