

FLU SEASON STARTS EARLY THIS YEAR

BUT IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO GET VACCINATED

TALLAHASSEE — The Florida Department of Health reports that the 2014-2015 flu season is off to an early start and Floridians are urged to get vaccinated to protect themselves and others against the flu. Activity levels are highest in children but overall influenza activity is widely spread across the state. Increased influenza activity in children typically comes ahead of increases in activity in adults and the elderly. Within the last week, there has been an increase in the percentage of pregnant women seeking care at emergency departments for influenza or influenza like illnesses (ILI) and the level is similar to what we see at the height of influenza season.

The flu vaccine is safe and continues to be the best way to protect yourself and others from the flu. The national Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that all individuals six months of age and older receive the flu vaccine each year. Since infants younger than 6 months of age are too young to get vaccinated against influenza, it is important that family members (including pregnant mothers) and other caregivers for these children be vaccinated to help protect them from the disease. This week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that, nationally, this year's flu vaccine is not as effective against the most common flu strain identified this year because the virus has changed. Despite the change or "drift" in this strain, vaccination can still decrease severity of illness. It can also protect against other circulating strains of the virus, which is why vaccination is still recommended.

"It is highly advised that children and pregnant women receive the influenza vaccination to help protect themselves and others from influenza infection," said Dr. Celeste Philip, Deputy Secretary for Health and Deputy State Health Officer for Children's Medical Services (CMS). "The changed virus has not yet been identified in Florida, but the Department will continue to monitor this situation closely in partnership with the CDC."

It is especially important that people who do become infected with the influenza virus stay home when they are sick and parents keep sick children at home to prevent spreading the flu. Additional steps to prevent flu include coughing or sneezing into a tissue or your elbow, washing your hands frequently, and keeping your hands away from your face. Symptoms of the flu include headache, fever, severe cough, runny nose or body aches. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, see your primary care provider immediately for guidance on treatment. Early treatment with antivirals is important and can help people get better more quickly as well as help to prevent severe complications.

The flu vaccine is offered in many locations, including doctor's offices, clinics, health departments, retail stores, pharmacies, health centers and by many employers and schools. Check with your physician, your local health department or visit <http://www.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/prevention/flu-prevention/locate-a-flu-shot.html> to search for a flu vaccine location.

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