

September, 2008

# Seasonal Influenza

## Information for the Public

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### **What is influenza (“flu”)?**

Influenza, which is commonly known as “flu,” is a highly contagious viral illness. It is an illness that affects the breathing tubes and lungs.

### **What causes the flu?**

Influenza is caused by a virus.

### **Who is likely to get this illness?**

Influenza affects all age groups. The very young, the very old, and individuals with other health problems are at higher risk for serious illness, hospitalization, or death.

### **What time of the year am I likely to suffer from the illness?**

Influenza peaks from December to March, but may occur earlier or later. In tropical areas, it occurs throughout the year.

### **How is the flu spread?**

Influenza is spread from one person to another by coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread by direct contact with nasal discharges.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The usual symptoms include fever (101<sup>o</sup>-102<sup>o</sup> F), chills, muscle aches, sore throat, and a dry cough. Other symptoms may include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, headache, runny nose, eye pain, and sensitivity to light. Symptoms usually last two to seven days.

### **What are the complications?**

The most common complication of the flu is pneumonia. Other complications may include lung or heart problems, and death. Reye syndrome occurred in children treated with aspirin for influenza or chickenpox. Now that aspirin is no longer used in children, Reye syndrome is rare.

### **How is the flu diagnosed?**

Influenza is diagnosed on the basis of the characteristic symptoms, particularly if it has been reported in a community. Viral cultures or rapid influenza tests can also help in diagnosis.

### **Can influenza be prevented?**

The best protection is to get flu vaccine every year before the flu season starts. Also, wash your hands often. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve when you cough or sneeze. Basic personal hygiene such as hand washing and restricting ill persons from work or school is recommended to prevent the spread of influenza.

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## Infectious Disease Epidemiology Program

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### **Is there a treatment for influenza?**

Oseltamivir and Zanamivir are used for treatment of influenza A and B. They shorten illness by about one day. These drugs are not a substitute for getting the vaccine.

### **Who should get the vaccine (flu shot)?**

There are two types of influenza vaccine: a vaccine that is given by injection (inactivated influenza vaccine or TIV), and a vaccine that is given as nose drops (LAIV). TIV can be given to any individual aged 6 months and older. LAIV is licensed for healthy individuals age 2 to 49 years. Talk to your doctor or health department for more information. Annual vaccination is recommended for:

- All persons, including school aged children, who want to reduce the risk of becoming ill or spreading influenza to others;
- All children aged 6 months to 18 years;
- All persons aged  $\geq 50$  years;
- Children and adolescents (ages 6 months – 18 years) who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy;
- Women who will be pregnant during influenza season;
- Adults and children who have chronic disorders of the heart or lungs, kidney, liver or blood. This includes children with asthma.
- Adults and children with diabetes;
- Adults and children with immunosuppression;
- Adults and children who have brain or spinal cord or muscular disorders that might impair breathing or consciousness;
- Residents of nursing homes;
- Health care workers;
- Persons who live with or care for high risk persons, including healthy household contacts and caregivers of babies and toddlers.

In years when influenza vaccine is well-matched to flu virus, the vaccine is 70-90% effective in preventing influenza in healthy adults. Effectiveness is lower (50-77%) when vaccine and flu virus are not well-matched.

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