



Influenza detected early - flu shots urged

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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An early outbreak of influenza has prompted the Alabama Department of Public Health to urge high-risk individuals to seek flu shots as soon as they can.

"I urge Alabamians who are at high risk from influenza to get the flu shot," said Dr. Donald Williamson, State Health Officer. "This outbreak is much earlier than usual and it may mean that the flu season will be more severe than average."

Several groups of people should obtain flu shots because they are at high risk of complications, such as pneumonia or even death. These groups include persons 65 years old or older; residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities that house persons of any age who have long-term illnesses; adults and children who have chronic heart or lung conditions, including asthma; adults and children who need regular medical care or have been in a hospital because of diseases like diabetes, chronic kidney disease, or weakened immune system; women who will be more than 3 months pregnant during the flu season, children 6-23 months of age and household contacts of high risk people.

October and November are the recommended times for flu shots. Shots are available from private physicians, clinics, public health clinics and pharmacies. "Folks need to seek flu shots immediately. Some providers have already run out of vaccine," said Winkler Sims, director of the Immunization Division of the Alabama Department of Public Health. "The combination of the early appearance of outbreaks and the subtype of influenza suggest that we will experience a severe influenza season."

In mid-October, up to half of the students were absent from one school in Blount County. Through cooperation with the local hospital and physicians, samples were taken and sent to the state public health laboratory. Influenza type A was confirmed by culture.

Normally, influenza does not cause outbreaks in Alabama until December, at the earliest. Texas has been experiencing widespread influenza activity and other states are having cases of flu.

Laboratory tests showed the first outbreak this year was due to type A influenza. Although the influenza viruses from Blount County have not been subtyped, all the influenza viruses found in the rest of the nation have been a certain subtype of influenza A. This subtype of influenza A is more likely to cause those at high risk to develop complications, including death.

Influenza is caused by a virus. In an average year, 20 percent of the population experiences influenza. Symptoms include the sudden onset of fever, often in the 102 to 104 degree F range, headache, body aches, mild sore throat, stuffy nose and the beginning of a cough. Severe symptoms last 2-7 days but the cough can last for weeks. Some patients become so sick that they need hospitalization and some even die.

Most of these severe complications occur among high-risk people. In a severe year, 720 Alabamians die and over 2,000 are hospitalized as a result of influenza.

Influenza vaccine is made from three different influenza viruses. The viruses are killed, so flu shots cannot cause flu. The viruses in the vaccine change each year. That is why one needs to get a flu shot each year.

Influenza is very infectious because it spreads through the air. This is why a large number of people become ill at the same time, as happened in the Blount County school.

For more information about flu, go to the following Web site:
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/flu/fluvirus.htm>.

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