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Get the flu shot this fall, not the flu!

With the arrival of cooler temperatures and falling leaves, many of us are looking forward to annual fall activities, like sporting events, pumpkin patches, trick-or-treating, holidays and family gatherings. There is another annual visitor that is as predictable as the seasons, but not as welcome.

“Seasonal influenza, at its mildest, makes people miserable and keeps them out of work and school for days,” said Michele Bever, health director for South Heartland District Health Department. “Influenza also has the potential to make people very sick, especially those who are at higher risk for complications from infection.”

Symptoms of influenza can include fever, cough, sore throat, headache, chills, muscle aches, and fatigue. According to Bever, influenza “should not be confused with gastrointestinal illness,” which she says is often called the “stomach flu.” “Influenza, or “true flu”, is a respiratory (nose, throat, lungs) illness and is an annual threat responsible for widespread illness, hospitalization, and death.”

Whether it will be a ‘bad flu year’ or not depends on which versions of the influenza virus show up, but data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that 9.2 million to 35.6 million people are affected by influenza each year in the United States and 140,000 to 710,000 are hospitalized for respiratory and heart condition illness associated with season influenza virus infections. In addition, the CDC reports that the number of deaths over the past 16 years ranged from about 12,000 to 56,000 per year.

Dorrann Hultman, the health department’s community health services coordinator, encourages people to “protect yourself and your loved ones from influenza.” She suggests following the CDC’s “Take 3” actions to fight the flu:

1. **Get Vaccinated.** Everyone 6 months and older should get a flu vaccine every season. It’s especially important for certain people to get vaccinated either because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for people at high risk for developing flu-related complications. The CDC recommends getting the flu vaccine as soon as it is available or by the end of October, before the flu begins spreading in your community.

2. **Take steps to prevent illness and stop the spread of germs.** Prevention is the easiest way to avoid illness. Hultman explains that “simple actions, such as coughing or sneezing into your sleeve, avoiding people who are sick, and frequent hand washing will go a long way toward avoiding illness.” In addition, Hultman recommends staying home when you are sick prevents spreading the disease to others. “However, one of the best ways to avoid the flu is to get an influenza vaccination every year,” she said.
3. **If you get the flu, antiviral drugs can treat your illness.** Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines that can shorten viral illnesses like influenza and make the symptoms less severe. They must be used early to treat people who are very sick, but they can help prevent serious flu complications, like pneumonia.

“Influenza is an annual threat. If we get vaccinated, we can reduce our chances of getting the flu, or passing it to others who are at higher risk for complications,” said Hultman.

“Most insurance covers flu vaccinations,” she said. “But if you don’t have insurance and have problems paying for a flu vaccine, contact SHDHD for help. We can help you get the flu shot this fall, not the flu!”

For more information about influenza, visit the Centers for Disease Control website at: www.cdc.gov or contact the South Heartland District Health Department at 402-462-6211 or toll free 1-877-238-7595 or on the web at www.southheartlandhealth.org.

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