

Celebrate Vaccination Week by Getting Flu Shot

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has announced the week of December 8-14, 2008 as National Influenza Vaccination Week.

The purpose of this week-long event is to raise awareness of the importance of continuing annual influenza vaccinations and to increase vaccination rates as we approach the height of the annual flu season, typically in January or February of each year.

Infection rates are typically highest among children, yet influenza viruses can cause disease at any age. Similarly, while rates of serious illness and death are highest among adults over the age of 65 and children under the age of 2, influenza takes its toll on the health of individuals of all ages.

In any given year, 5 percent to 20 percent of the US population gets the flu, more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications, and an average of 35,000 people die from the influenza viruses. Over the past quarter century, an estimated yearly average of 32,600 influenza-related deaths occur among those over the age of 65.

Annual flu vaccination is the most effective method for preventing influenza virus infection and its complications, and can be administered to anyone over the age of six months to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with the flu or of transmitting influenza to others.

Generally, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting the flu can get vaccinated. However, the CDC recommends that certain people should get vaccinated every year because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications, such as the elderly, or because they live with or care for high risk persons, such as those who live and working in nursing homes.

In addition to effective disease prevention, most studies find that vaccination reduces direct health care costs and indirect medical costs from work absenteeism and reduced productivity. One recent estimate put the annual economic burden of seasonal influenza in the US at \$87 billion, including \$10 billion in direct medical costs. Research has also documented the considerable cost burden of illness among children. In one study, the average total cost of childhood hospitalization from an influenza-related stay was over \$13,000.

Currently, increasing vaccination coverage among persons over the age of 65 and those who have high risk conditions is the highest federal priority for expanding influenza vaccine use. This

year, for the first time, the CDC is also recommending the annual vaccination of all school-aged children (ages 5-18).

A recent report published in Health Affairs found that children are at risk for flu and increase the spread of the disease to high-risk populations and family members. The same study found that immunizing children at school offers an efficient approach to covering this population; moreover, school-based immunization programs reduce the burden of seasonal flu on households and local communities. In other research, the benefits of vaccinating school-aged children has been shown to extend to unvaccinated members of the child's household.

National Influenza Vaccination Week is the public health community's annual reminder of the gulf between clinically-grounded recommendations and reality – the CDC recommends that 220 million Americans or about three-fourths of the population should get vaccinated annually, yet fewer than 100 million people get vaccinated in any given year.

Fortunately, unlike some recent years, vaccine manufacturers are projecting that over 140 million doses of influenza vaccine will be produced for use in the US during the 2008-2009 flu season. And, in these tough economic times, the annual cost of a flu shot is a reasonable \$20 to \$40 depending on your provider (for Medicare beneficiaries, the influenza vaccine and its administration are covered Part B benefits).

For your health and the health of those you live and work with, this week is a perfect time to get your annual flu vaccination.

For more information on local providers in Northern Nevada offering flu (and pneumonia) vaccinations, please visit the Nevada Immunization Coalitions at www.immunizenevada.com/about-nic/flu/ or the American Lung Association at www.flucliniclocator.org.

For additional information on National Influenza Vaccination Week and seasonal flu in the United States, please visit the CDC at www.cdc.gov/flu.

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