

Flu season is back; take precautions to avoid illness



Posted: Wednesday, January 7, 2015 1:38 pm | Updated: 1:53 pm, Wed Jan 7, 2015.

By TRACY BELL For the Stafford County Sun | **0 comments**

If there's anything people are desperate to avoid, it's the flu.

Highly anticipated and dreaded, flu season doesn't have to be so bad, according to local medical professionals who say that taking precautions can make a difference in everyone's health.

Cathy Yablonski, senior vice president and operations administrator for Stafford Hospital and Fredericksburg's Mary Washington Hospital, said that Mary Washington Healthcare has seen a continued rise of confirmed flu cases in December through the early part of January.

"Our hospitals are currently in the moderate to high incidence of flu activity," Yablonski said. "Associates who have not received the flu immunization are required to wear a mask while on our property. During this stage of incidence, we also may ask visitors to wear masks or protective clothing when visiting the hospital."

Yablonski added that early intervention is important for anyone experiencing flu-like symptoms.

Dr. Kevin Donaghey, medical director for Patient First's Garrisonville and Central Park medical centers, said that the offices have seen about 25 percent more patients than last month, and many of them are being seen for seasonal influenza and upper respiratory conditions.

"I think the increase is largely because we are experiencing a busier flu season this year than last," Donaghey said. "Compared to this time last year, we are seeing three times as many flu cases. About one out of every eight patients we are seeing lately is diagnosed with flu."

Donaghey added that a person is contagious from one day before having symptoms of the flu up to seven days after getting sick.

People get the flu by inhaling respiratory droplets produced by coughing or sneezing. They can also become infected by touching an object contaminated by the flu virus, including a hand that covered a sneeze, and especially after then touching their own mouth, nose or eyes.

There are things that people can do to protect themselves from getting and spreading the flu, Donaghey said, including making sure to get a flu shot. It's the best protection against the flu, he said, adding that it takes about two weeks from the time the shot is given to develop maximum protection.

When a person thinks they have contracted the flu, it's important to see a doctor as soon as possible to determine through a simple test if it's the flu or not, Donaghey said. If it is, he said, the doctor may prescribe anti-viral medication that can lessen the duration of the illness if it's taken within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

People with flu symptoms should stay home until they are free of a fever for 24 hours, Donaghey said. Often people who end up having the flu describe feeling like they've been hit by a truck, said Donaghey, and the symptoms come on fast.

Symptoms of the flu include a high fever, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, headache, extreme tiredness, muscle aches, vomiting, diarrhea and shortness of breath.

Complications of the flu include pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, about half of the country is experiencing high flu activity, which is expected to continue in the coming weeks. Increases are also expected in states that have not yet have significant activity, the CDC said in a Q&A sheet on the flu season released Monday.

Flu activity most commonly peaks in the United States between December and February. The CDC suggests that people get vaccinated by October each season, but noted that it is not too late to get vaccinated now.

Three kinds of flu viruses commonly circulate: influenza A (H1N1) viruses, influenza A (H3N2) viruses, and influenza B viruses.

Despite the vaccine, those who get vaccinated can still get the flu, the CDC said. People may have been exposed to a flu virus before getting vaccinated or as the body is building antibodies against the virus; people may also be exposed to a flu virus that the seasonal flu vaccine does not protect against; and some older people or those with a chronic illness may build less immunity to the viruses, the CDC said. Influenza A viruses are most common so far, according to the CDC.

Influenza A-predominant seasons have been associated with more severe illness and mortality, especially in older people and young children, relative to seasons during which H1N1 or B viruses predominated. There are early indications that this season may be severe, especially for people aged 65 years and older and young children, the CDC said.

The CDC continues to urge unvaccinated people get vaccinated, and recommends vaccinations for people 6 months and older.

The CDC now recommends the nasal spray vaccine for healthy children 2 through 8 years of age, when it is immediately available. Recent studies suggest that the nasal spray flu vaccine may work better than the flu shot in younger children, but the CDC said that if it is not available, these children should get the flu shot as opposed to waiting.

Flu vaccines are offered at many doctors' offices, clinics, health departments, pharmacies and college health centers, as well as by many employers, and even by some schools.

According to AFC/Doctors Express, which serves a variety of locations including neighboring Prince William County, the B strain of the flu tends to appear in January and February during each flu season. AFC/Doctors Express reported that its offices have been packed with patients since New Year's. In addition to the flu, contagious stomach bugs referred to as gastroenteritis are going around. They are infections of the stomach and intestines.

The biggest danger of the flu, according to AFC/Doctors Express, is that it wears down the body's ability to fight other infections that a person may get while having the flu, such as pneumonia. Sometimes these infections can be fatal.

To find local flu vaccination locations, visit <http://flushot.healthmap.org/>. Tracy Bell can be reached at info@staffordcountysun.com.