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State of Louisiana

Department of Health and Hospitals

Office of the State Health Officer

10/04/12

Dear Healthcare Professional,

The Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, Office of Public Health urges you to get an influenza (flu) vaccination this 2012-2013 influenza season. While most people traditionally associate "the flu season" with the fall, the truth is that influenza disease activity most often peaks in January or later.

Getting yourself vaccinated against the flu is the single most important thing you can do to protect yourself, your patients, and even your loved ones against influenza this season. The flu vaccine is now even available for healthy adults in the form of a nasal spray, as well as the traditional "flu shot".

What is Influenza?

- Influenza, also called "the flu" is a contagious respiratory disease that can cause cough, fever (usually high), headache, muscle aches, chills, sore throat, extreme fatigue, and runny nose. The disease is usually spread by droplets from coughing or sneezing. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to hospitalization and death.
- Certain people, including the young, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with chronic health problems are at higher risk from serious flu-related complications.
- People sometimes confuse the term "flu" with gastrointestinal (stomach) viruses or other respiratory viruses that can have similar symptoms, but true influenza can be very serious.
- Every year, about 36,000 people in the United States die from flu-related complications, and more than 200,000 people are hospitalized—including 20,000 children.

Why is vaccination against influenza so important?

- Healthcare workers are in contact with people at high risk from serious flu-related complications every day.
- Low vaccination rates among healthcare workers have been associated with influenza outbreaks in hospitals and nursing homes due to contact with many patients and other staff.
- You can get the flu and be asymptomatic or have mild symptoms, but still be contagious to others, putting your patients and co-workers at risk.
- The safety of your patients may depend on your getting a flu vaccine this and every year.
- Currently, only 40% of healthcare workers get vaccinated against the flu. We need to do better.

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What you need to know about flu vaccines?

- For healthy children and adults aged 2-49 years old, the "nasal spray" vaccine (live, attenuated influenza vaccine, or "LAIV") is an option. LAIV can be used in otherwise healthy healthcare workers, except for those in direct contact with severely immunosuppressed patients cared for in specialized patient care areas.
- In addition, the injectable inactivated vaccine ("flu shot") is safe and readily available for people aged 6 months and older, including pregnant women.
- True adverse events from influenza vaccine are extremely rare. The most common problems are pain at the injection site (with the shot), or stuffy nose, headache, or cough (from the nasal spray).
- Neither type of vaccine can give you the flu.
- Influenza vaccines prevent influenza illness in 70-90 percent of healthy adults younger than 65 years of age, when the vaccine and circulating viruses are well-matched.
- Because it takes two weeks for the vaccine to provide protection, people who believe they contracted the flu after being vaccinated may have been exposed *before* they develop antibodies. Alternatively, they may have been exposed to another type of respiratory virus with similar "flu like" symptoms.

To get more information about Healthcare workers and influenza, please see the recent MMWR at: http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6138a1.htm?s_cid=mm6138a1_w.

This year, don't get the flu and don't spread the flu. Protect yourself, your loved ones, and your patients by getting a flu vaccine. In addition to other State and National influenza vaccination partners, we thank you for your participation in the National goal to reduce influenza illness.

Sincerely,

Jimmy Guidry, MD

Jimmy Guidry, MD
Louisiana State Health Officer