

Flu Numbers Climbing, Flu Season Has Arrived

By Cynthia Taggart, Panhandle Health District

Based on the numbers of people visiting their doctors with flu-like symptoms, flu season has arrived in the five northern counties. Lab tests show that H1N1, the flu virus in the 2009 pandemic, is the virus most identified in the positive flu tests so far.

“The virus hasn’t really changed,” says Jeff Lee, Panhandle Health District epidemiologist. “It disproportionately affects young and middle-aged adults. It’s also targeted by the flu vaccine.”

Symptoms that drive people to call their doctors include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headaches, chills and fatigue. Two vaccines are available to help prevent catching the flu. One targets three viruses and the other targets four. Both vaccines target the viruses that are showing up in most positive flu tests.

Lee encourages people to get their flu shots if they haven’t yet. The vaccine takes about two weeks to reach full strength and is the best flu prevention available. Washing hands well and often also reduces exposure to the flu virus.

So far, antiviral medications work on the flu viruses identified. Antivirals help reduce symptoms after they’ve begun, but patients benefit most when the medication is started within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms. People at high risk of flu complications, such as pneumonia, should call their doctors as soon as they notice flu symptoms.

The flu is highly contagious. Germs travel through the air when people don’t cover their coughs and sneezes. Flu germs stay on doorknobs, light switches and other commonly touched objects. People with symptoms should call their doctors and minimize contact with other people, cover their coughs and sneezes and stay home.

People at greatest risk for complications with the flu viruses identified are:

- Young children
- People in their senior years
- Pregnant women or women who just gave birth
- People with chronic medical conditions
- Anyone younger than 19 on long-term aspirin therapy
- Anyone morbidly obese
- American Indian and Alaskan Natives

- Residents of nursing homes and chronic care facilities.

Spokane Regional Health District also is reporting an increase in laboratory-confirmed cases of flu.

A limited number of flu shots are available at PHD offices, so calling first is recommended.

- PHD Hayden – 415-5270
- PHD Bonner – 263-5159
- PHD Boundary – 267-5558
- PHD Benewah – 245-4556
- PHD Kellogg – 786-7474