

Health Officials Urge Vaccination Before Flu Season Strikes

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With flu season set to begin and vaccine in plentiful supply, the Texas Department of State Health Services encourages everyone 6 months old and older to get vaccinated to protect themselves and their families against the flu.

"We have already seen an increase in flu activity in Texas, and now is the time to get vaccinated," said Dr. Lisa Cornelius, DSHS infectious diseases medical officer. "A dose of vaccine now will help protect people throughout the flu season. There is no reason to put it off."

The flu is caused by various influenza viruses. The vaccine is formulated each year to match the strains of flu researchers expect to be circulating. New versions of the vaccine available this year will protect against four strains of the virus. The new vaccine is available as a shot for everyone and as a nasal spray for people ages 2 to 49 who are healthy and not pregnant. The version of the vaccine that covers three strains is also still available.

This year's vaccine protects against the strains A/California/7/2009 (H1N1), A/Victoria/361/2011 (H3N2) and B/Massachusetts/2/2012. The four-strain vaccine will also protect against B/Brisbane/60/2008.

Flu symptoms come on quickly and can be severe. They include fever, coughing, sore throat, aches, chills and fatigue. Most healthy people recover without problems after a week or more, but people 65 and older, pregnant women, young children and people with chronic health conditions are at higher risk for serious complications and even death. It is especially important for people in those high-risk groups to be vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends everyone 6 months old or older be vaccinated against seasonal flu. The CDC also says that children under age 9 who are getting the flu vaccine for the first time should get two doses at least four weeks apart.

People can help stop the spread of the flu and other illnesses by covering all coughs and sneezes, washing their hands frequently and staying home when sick.

People can contact their health care provider, local health department or dial 2-1-1 to find out where to get a flu shot. Flu information and tips for protecting against the flu are at texasflu.org.