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Idaho flu season in full swing; health officials urge measures to protect children and elderly

Influenza season has arrived in Idaho, and it has the potential to be severe, Idaho public health officials say. Because it can be particularly severe for children and those older than 65, public health officials are recommending that everyone who hasn't yet been vaccinated should visit a drop-in clinic, pharmacy, or call their healthcare provider and schedule an appointment for vaccination as soon as possible.

"We've had numerous reports of flu outbreaks in long-term care facilities, like nursing homes. Three deaths have been reported in Idaho already and it is still early in the season," said Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, deputy state epidemiologist. "The flu vaccine is the best protection for you and your family. It appears to be well-matched for two of the three flu strains in circulation. It is not well-matched to the third strain, but being vaccinated may reduce symptoms if you are sick with the virus. If you have not been vaccinated, please don't delay."

The most common influenza virus subtype circulating this season is H3N2. In previous seasons when H3N2 was the most common circulating subtype, there were more severe illnesses and increased numbers of deaths, especially in older people and young children.

In light of the partial mismatch between circulating flu strains and the strains included in the vaccine, rapid treatment with antiviral medications is an especially important second line of defense for patients at risk for flu complications.

In addition to vaccination against the flu, there are other things people can do to protect themselves and their families against serious respiratory illnesses like the flu, including:

- Washing your hands frequently with soap and water, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Covering your coughs and sneezes.
- Staying home when you are sick.
- Avoiding others who appear to be sick.

Home care guidelines are available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/homecare/>

Severe symptoms of the flu that should prompt an immediate healthcare evaluation (either by your healthcare provider or at an emergency room or urgent care center) include:

- Fever above 100° F
- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish or gray skin color
- Pain or pressure in the chest or stomach area
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Dehydration, not urinating enough or no tears when crying

- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Being very sleepy or confused, or not waking up or interacting
- Being so irritable that nothing makes the child feel better
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and more severe cough

For more information about influenza in Idaho, please visit the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's influenza website at www.flu.idaho.gov or contact your local public health district. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has an Influenza website with information at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/fluactivitysurv.htm>