



Press Release

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LMH urges precautions as flu cases on rise

Holiday cheer is not all that is being spread around Lawrence this week. The flu bug is hitting hard, and Lawrence Memorial Hospital officials have noted an increase in the number of patients being seen in physician practices and the hospital with flu symptoms. LMH has confirmed 95 cases of influenza in the last 12 days, and that's prompted stricter visiting guidelines and advice to the community to stay home if you're sick.

"Many hospitalized patients are already in immune-compromised situations," said Dr. Sabrina Prewett, Chief of Emergency Medicine at LMH. "The last thing they need is to be exposed to the flu and other contagious illnesses."

For that reason, Dr. Prewett urges families and friends who are not feeling well or exhibiting symptoms of illnesses to not visit hospitalized patients. In addition, hospital officials are asking well visitors who have not had a flu shot to don a mask and practice appropriate hand hygiene when visiting patients – the same infection control practices required of LMH employees and volunteers.

In the United States, seasonal flu occurs during the late fall through early spring seasons. From November through December, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has received a number of reports of severe respiratory illness among young and middle-aged adults, many of whom were infected with influenza A (H1N1) pdm09 (pH1N1) virus. Multiple pH1N1-associated hospitalizations, including many requiring intensive care unit admission, and some fatalities have been reported by the CDC. Some areas of the United States, including Texas and New York, already are experiencing high activity, and that is expected to increase across the country during the next few weeks.

The CDC reports that the pH1N1 virus that emerged in 2009 caused more illness in children and young adults, compared to older adults, although severe illness was seen in all age groups. While it's not possible to predict which flu viruses will predominate during the entire 2013-2014 influenza season, the CDC reports that pH1N1 has been the predominant circulating virus so far. For this reason, the CDC cautions that if pH1N1 virus continues to circulate widely, illness that disproportionately affects young and middle-aged adults may occur.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment is reporting widespread flu activity and that two Kansans have already died from causes directly linked to the flu. Every year, an average 5 to 20 percent of the population gets the flu, and about 36,000 people die. Influenza or pneumonia contributed to or was the direct cause of 1,444 deaths among Kansas residents during the 2012-2013 influenza season, and the CDC estimated approximately 380,000 people across the country were hospitalized from flu complications. Some people, such as older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious flu complications.

Dr. Prewett says the flu vaccine, year after year, is the best protection from the flu, and it takes about two weeks until you get full benefit. “The protection is not 100 percent,” she said, “but having had a shot should protect you from the most serious symptoms and complications.”

There are two main types of flu virus – A and B – and many strains of each. Each year, experts develop a vaccine designed to protect against the strains they feel are most likely to be prevalent. This year’s vaccine is targeted against two strains of A and one strain of B virus. The Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department, physician practices and area pharmacies offer flu shots.

Karrey Britt, communications coordinator for the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department, says it’s not too late to get your flu vaccine. Flu shots are provided during clinic hours on a walk-in basis at the Health Department, located at 200 Maine Street. The flu shot is \$25 for children ages 6 months to 3 years old and \$30 for anyone 3 years old and older. For more information, contact the Health Department at 843-0721.

Nearly all persons six months and older are recommended to receive a flu vaccine every year. Vaccination is especially important for protecting those at high risk for serious flu complications, including young children, pregnant women, adults 65 years and older, and anyone with chronic health conditions like asthma, heart disease, and diabetes. Those caring for, or in regular contact with, an infant less than six months of age should also be immunized. At this age, babies are too young to be vaccinated and are more vulnerable to complications from influenza.

In addition to getting the flu vaccine, you should take these steps to avoid spreading germs:

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you get the flu, stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread this way.

Unfortunately, all of these preventive measures, with the exception of vaccine, are usually practiced too late. You usually become contagious within 24 to 72 hours after being infected, nearly always before you begin to feel sick. And you remain contagious for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone (without the use of fever-reducing medication).

Symptoms of the flu include: fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough and muscle aches. Complications can include pneumonia, ear and sinus infections and dehydration; the flu might also worsen other chronic conditions. Contact your health care provider if you have flu symptoms for treatment advice. Other components of treatment include rest, plenty of fluids and over-the-counter or prescription medicines, such as decongestants, to relieve symptoms.

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