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Early Vaccinations for Seasonal Flu Recommended This Year

Since the spring, considerable attention has been paid to the emergence of a new strain of flu – novel H1N1 influenza. Unlike the usual seasonal flu viruses we see each year, this new strain has continued to circulate throughout the summer months and is likely to co-mingle with the seasonal flu when it arrives later this year. While it is important to be vigilant about the novel H1N1 flu, it is more important than ever to remember to protect ourselves from the coming seasonal influenza.

We cannot afford to ignore what we know about seasonal influenza. To date, cases of H1N1 flu have not been more virulent than seasonal flu. Most cases are treated at home, and the vast majority of people acquiring the new strain continue to recover with no lasting effects. While the same can be said about most cases of seasonal flu, it is wise to remember the following facts:

- seasonal flu and its complications kills approximately 36,000 Americans every year;
- more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from seasonal flu complications annually;
- depending upon the year, 5 – 20% of the population gets seasonal flu.

Although vaccination for seasonal flu will not provide protection from the H1N1 flu, it is important to begin building immunity from the other 3 strains that are predicted to affect us this flu season as soon as possible so that if a person does become ill with H1N1, he or she will not run the risk of catching both the seasonal flu and the novel flu at the same time.

This year, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has recommended a temporary adjustment in scheduling seasonal flu vaccination clinics. Since the seasonal flu vaccine has already been produced and is being distributed now, early vaccination for seasonal flu is encouraged this year. The protection from the seasonal flu shot is expected to last until the threat from the seasonal flu has ended. Many physicians and mass vaccinators will begin seasonal flu vaccination efforts in early-mid September. Vaccine for H1N1 will become available later.

Since influenza viruses change from year to year, it is important to get a new flu shot every year.

Nearly everyone should get vaccinated for seasonal flu. While we think of the elderly and people with certain medical conditions as important groups to protect from the flu, beginning in 2000 the Centers for Disease Control began recommending that everyone over the age of 50 receive a flu shot. This is because about 1/3 of all people aged 50-64 have at least one high-risk condition. Vaccination also is recommended for people who are in close or frequent contact with anyone considered to be at high risk, such as people who work with young children, anyone working with patients in chronic care facilities (including nursing homes), women who will be pregnant during the flu season, all children age 6 months and older, adults who have chronic disorders of the pulmonary or cardiovascular system (including asthma), adults who have diabetes or kidney dysfunction, and anyone with a compromised immune system.

Although the flu shot or nasal spray is the best protection against the flu, there are other measures people can take to protect themselves from respiratory illnesses and to avoid infecting others. These include

- 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.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you are sick with a flu-like illness, stay home **for at least 24 hours after the fever (100° F or greater) is gone (without the use of fever-reducing medicine)**.
- Follow public health advice regarding school closures, avoiding crowds and other social distancing measures.
- If you don't have one yet, consider developing a family emergency plan and an emergency illness kit as a precaution.

In keeping with the CDC recommendations for early vaccinations, the Central Connecticut Health District will hold flu shot clinics for **seasonal flu** throughout September and October. Watch for postings in your local newspaper, read flyers in the local town buildings, or go to the Health District's website at www.ccthd.org to get the latest scheduling information. For additional information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Health District at 860-721-2822.