



INYO COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH BRIEF

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Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

December 23, 2009

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Although past its peak, the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus is still causing epidemic levels of illness in the community. California reports “widespread disease” at a time when many visitors are arriving in the Eastern Sierra for the holiday season. We therefore need not only be prepared for the usual surge of ski and snowboard injuries, but to be on the lookout for a surge in illness. This may be reflected by increased visits to our clinics and Emergency Room for respiratory illness among the visitor population, followed by a possible surge in respiratory illness among locals, especially when school opens in January.

At the same time that the epidemic has passed its peak, vaccine availability is increasing, and is now available to all at no charge. Although it would appear that this is “too little, too late”, there are a number of reasons to get vaccinated if you have not done so already:

- Epidemic levels of illness still exist in the community
- a post-holiday surge of illness is likely
- a third wave of illness is expected in the spring
- about 50% of the population is still unprotected (approx. 15% have been vaccinated, 15% have been sick, and 15% have some previous immunity)

Parents and children

Most parents who want vaccine for their children have been able to get it. Those who do not intend to get the vaccine for their children cite the following reasons:

- safety concerns (Extensive safety data with more than 85 million doses of H1N1 vaccine given so far is uniformly very reassuring, with no significant pattern of adverse reactions.)
- the outbreak is not as serious as public health officials once thought (Although the number of deaths is about the same as seasonal influenza, most deaths are among the young rather than the elderly)
- they don't believe their child is at risk for a serious case (Although about 2/3rd's of deaths in children have been among those with chronic underlying medical conditions, the other 1/3 have been previously healthy with no risk factors.)

- they believe they can get medication to treat H1N1 if their child does get ill (Tamilfu has not been shown decrease the risk of death in children.)

Adults

Poll findings also indicate that less than a quarter of adults prioritized to receive the H1N1 flu vaccine have received it so far. These high priority adults include pregnant women; adults with chronic conditions that make them more vulnerable to flu complications; health and emergency personnel; adults who care for or live with children less than 6 months old; and young adults ages 18-24. This group cites safety concerns; a belief that the outbreak is less serious than public officials once thought; and a belief that they are not at risk for a serious case of H1N1 as major reasons for their decision not to get the vaccine. Again, the vaccine is turning out to have an excellent safety record. The groups at highest risk for death from the H1N1 infection or complications are infants less than 1 year of age, pregnant females, and adults age 50-64 with chronic medical conditions.

Everyone

There is currently sufficient vaccine available to immunize everyone. If you are over 65 and not previously eligible, you can now receive the vaccine. If you are a college student home for the holidays, you should get vaccinated before returning to school. If you have extended family visiting from another area, and they have not been able to access vaccine where they live, we have enough vaccine for them (Our lines are shorter!). If you are an adult with asthma, diabetes, chronic heart, lung, kidney, or thyroid disease, you should get vaccinated. If you are pregnant, or think you might become pregnant this winter, you should get vaccinated.

So, now is the time to do something for yourself, your family and co-workers, and your community. Help stop the spread of the 2009 H1N1 influenza – the gift that keeps on giving!

- Get vaccinated – call Dwayne's, your healthcare provider, or the Health Department at 760-873-7868.
- Wash your hands, and cover your cough if you are sick
- Stay home if you are sick - until you have been fever free for more than 24 hours

And most important, enjoy the holiday season – stay healthy and safe!