SANTA FE – The New Mexico Department of Health announced Dec. 17 the first flu-related death reported for the 2018-2019 flu season.

The death occurred in a woman 65-years or older from Lincoln County. Her death is an important reminder that flu can cause serious illness or death, particularly among persons at risk for flu-related complications.

“As flu infections increase across the state, it is important to get vaccinated if you haven’t already received the flu vaccine this season,” DOH Secretary Lynn Gallagher said. “The flu vaccine is the best way for you to protect yourself and your families, especially young children and elderly family members.”

Overall, flu activity remains low, both in New Mexico and nationwide; however, flu activity typically peaks between December and February. During the 2017-2018 flu season, New Mexico had over 280 influenza (flu) and pneumonia-related deaths.

NMDOH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that everyone six months of age and older get their flu vaccine and strongly encourages residents to contact their local healthcare providers or pharmacies to receive vaccine for protection against influenza and pneumonia.

The DOH’s public health offices are among the locations that provide vaccine to residents with no health insurance. An interactive map for help finding a provider near you that vaccinates uninsured adults can be found here.

Pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine can be given at the same time as flu vaccine to patients who qualify. It is an important additional form of protection because flu frequently causes types of pneumonia that can be prevented by the pneumococcal vaccine. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about whether you need this vaccine as well.

While everyone 6 months of age and older should get a flu vaccine each flu season, it's especially important that people in the following groups get vaccinated, either because they are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or because they live with or care for people at high risk for developing flu-related complications:

- Pregnant women (any trimester) and up to two weeks post-partum
- Children younger than 5, but especially children younger than 2 years old
- People age 65 and older
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, and lung or heart disease and those who are immuno-suppressed.
- People who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities
- People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu, including healthcare personnel and caregivers of babies younger than 6 months
- Native Americans and Alaskan Natives
- People who are morbidly obese

Symptoms of seasonal flu may include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, headache, tiredness and/or muscle aches. People who might have flu – particularly if they are in the groups listed above at risk for severe disease and complications – should seek medical care and start antiviral medication as soon as possible.

There are also simple things anyone can do to help prevent getting – or spreading – the flu:

- Wash your hands and your children’s hands frequently, especially after contact with other people.
- Use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze and dispose of the tissue afterward, or cough or sneeze into your sleeve if no tissues are available.
- Clean your hands after you cough or sneeze, even if you use a tissue. Use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner if soap and water are not available and your hands are not visibly dirty.
- Stay home if you get the flu.
- Try to avoid close contact with sick people.

For more information about how the NMDOH and CDC track flu cases in New Mexico and beyond visit the Influenza Surveillance Program webpage. To find pharmacies in your area that may have flu and pneumococcal vaccine, visit: www.vaccinefinder.org/ or call the CDC INFO immunization hotline toll-free at 1 (800) 232-4636.