


The New Mexico Department of Health reports widespread flu activity across New Mexico March 2, and expects heightened activity for weeks to come. NMDOH encourages residents who haven't gotten the annual flu shot to do so as soon as possible as this year's influenza vaccine is proving effective in reducing a person's risk of having to visit the doctor's office for influenza by nearly half.

"We are only at the halfway point of the 2016-2017 flu season, so anyone's chances of getting the flu are far from over," said Lynn Gallagher, Department of Health Cabinet Secretary. "Flu can infect anyone - including healthy people - sometimes more than once per flu season. All of us have a responsibility to help protect ourselves and those close to us who may be at high risk of serious flu complications such as hospitalization and death."

Since January, flu-related hospitalizations have climbed threefold, with young children 0-4 years of age and those older than 65 years having the highest risk. The predominant virus circulating is influenza A(H3), which is included in this season's vaccine.

Already 34 pneumonia and flu deaths have been reported during the 2016-2017 season. Last season, 190 New Mexicans died of pneumonia and/or flu.

It is recommended everyone 6 months and older get a flu vaccine. With more flu season still to come, getting a flu vaccination if you haven't already gotten one, or even if you think you already had the flu this season, is important and can still protect you from illness. Flu vaccine protects against multiple strains of flu that may be circulating at any given time, and people can get infected with more than one type of flu during the season.

The Department of Health recommends New Mexicans talk with their healthcare provider or pharmacist about getting the flu vaccine. The Department offers vaccinations for people without insurance or who are otherwise not able to get vaccinated. Those with Medicaid or other insurance who go to Public Health Offices are asked to bring their insurance card. Flu frequently causes types of pneumonia that can also be prevented by the pneumococcal vaccine, so asking your healthcare provider or pharmacist if you need the pneumococcal vaccine (which can be given at the same time as flu vaccine) is also recommended.

People in high risk groups and those who live with or care for high risk individuals are especially encouraged to get vaccinated against the flu. People in high risk groups are at increased risk for having serious flu-related complications, such as hospitalization and death. Flu vaccination is highly recommended for the following high risk groups:

• Pregnant women (any trimester) and up to two-weeks post-partum. Children under 5, but especially children younger than 2-years old. And people 65 years old and up.

• People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, and lung or heart disease and those with immunosuppression from medication or disease

• 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

• American Indians and Alaskan Natives

• People who are morbidly obese

While vaccination provides the greatest protection against the flu, other effective ways to avoid getting or spreading the flu include: washing hands frequently or using alcohol-based hand

sanitizer; covering coughs and sneezes with tissues, or coughing or sneezing into elbows; avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth; and staying home when sick and until fever-free for 24 hours without using fever-reducing medication.