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Flu Now Widespread Across Ohio; 287 Hospitalizations in One Week

Flu Vaccine Still Widely Available Across Ohio

COLUMBUS – Influenza-like illness is now widespread throughout Ohio for the first time this flu season, and the number-of associated hospitalizations are rising. The first week of January, there were 287 new confirmed flu-associated hospitalizations in Ohio compared to 157 the week before. There have been 654 total flu-associated hospitalizations since flu season began last October. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), flu activity is on the rise across the country and this trend is expected to continue for at least several more weeks.

Flu season in Ohio generally lasts from October to May, with flu-associated hospitalizations typically peaking between December and February. The 2015-16 flu season a year ago started a bit later and flu-associated hospitalizations did not peak until early March. There were 3,691 total flu-associated hospitalizations during last year's flu season.

"Influenza vaccination is the safest and most effective way to prevent the flu, except for infants younger than 6-month old who aren't eligible to receive it," said Sietske de Fijter, chief of the Bureau of Infectious Diseases and state epidemiologist for the Ohio Department of Health (ODH). "Vaccination can reduce flu illnesses, doctors' visits and missed work and school."

While vaccination provides the greatest protection against the flu, other effective ways to avoid getting or spreading it 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.

Symptoms of influenza can include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Flu vaccination is available at most healthcare providers' offices, local health departments and retail pharmacies.

"There are no flu vaccine shortages across Ohio," de Fijter said. "The short time it will take to get a flu vaccine is much less than the time it will take you to recover from the flu."

CDC recommends that clinicians administer one of two prescription antiviral drugs as a second line of defense as soon as possible to patients with confirmed or suspected influenza who are hospitalized, have severe illness, or may be at higher risk for flu complications. Patients who could benefit from them include children younger than 2 years old; adults 65 and older; people with chronic medical conditions including asthma, heart disease, or weakened immune systems; pregnant women; American Indians/Alaska Natives; and people who are morbidly obese.

"These antiviral medications can reduce the severity of the flu and prevent serious flu complications," de Fijter said. "They work best when started within two days of getting sick."

Adult flu-associated deaths are not reportable to ODH so these statistics are not available. Flu-associated pediatric deaths are reportable, but there have been no such deaths reported in Ohio so far this flu season.

More information about influenza and flu activity in Ohio is available at www.flu.ohio.gov.