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Fight the Flu

Cases of respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus are increasing across the country, including in South Central Nebraska, according to health officials at the South Heartland District Health Department (SHDHD)

Michele Bever, PhD, executive director for SHDHD, wants all residents to know that influenza (the flu) is not something to take lightly. "Influenza is a serious contagious disease that can lead to hospitalization," Dr. Bever said. "It is not too late to get a flu shot to protect yourself and those around you."

Dorrann Hultman, public health nurse with SHDHD, recommends taking action to protect yourself and others by following these 3 steps to fight the flu:

1. Make a point to get a flu vaccine, it is not too late. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that everyone 6 months of age and older get a flu vaccine every year as soon as the vaccine becomes available. "Flu vaccine is the first and most important step in protecting yourself against flu viruses," said Hultman, "It also protects you from spreading flu to high risk people."

According to Hultman, children younger than 6 months of age are at high risk of serious flu illness because they are too young to be vaccinated. "So, it is important that caregivers be vaccinated," she said. "Others at high risk include pregnant women, people over 65 years of age and anyone with a chronic health condition such as asthma, heart or lung problems or diabetes."

2. Take everyday precautions to prevent the spread of germs. Hultman recommends always practicing good hand hygiene. "Wash your hands often with soap and water and use an alcohol based hand rub only when soap and water are not available," she said.

"Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue in the trash, then wash your hands. If a tissue is not available, cough or sneeze into your sleeve," she said.

Other recommendations for preventing the spread of germs include staying away from people who are sick, when possible. If you are sick, stay home from work, school or social activities for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone and limit your time with others to a minimum while you are sick. Regularly clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs.

3. Contact your doctor if you suspect you have influenza. If you have influenza, your health care provider may prescribe antiviral drugs to help fight your influenza infection. "Antiviral drugs are not antibiotics and are not

over the counter,' Hultman said. "When used early in the illness they can reduce the chance of developing serious flu complications."

Symptoms of influenza (flu) can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headaches, chills and fatigue. Although not as common, some people may have vomiting and diarrhea and some may have respiratory symptoms without having a fever. Contact your doctor or nurse for advice based on your symptoms.

The South Heartland District Health Department staff can be reached at 402-462-6211 or 1-877-238-7595 to provide information on where to get a flu vaccine if you can't afford one or if you have other flu related questions. For additional influenza information <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/consumer/index.html>.

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