



Boston Health Notes

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& Mayor Thomas M. Menino*

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Fall: Time to gear up for flu season

*By Kim Martin, RN, MAT, Health Educator, Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control Division*

Each year fall arrives with changing leaves, a chill in the air, and, in many places throughout the United States, the start of the influenza (“flu”) season. Although it is impossible to predict exactly when flu will appear in Boston, it usually arrives in late fall and lasts until early spring. Vaccines are expected to be plentiful during the 2008-2009 flu season and public health officials are advising the public to think about getting a flu shot now.

What is the flu and how does it spread?

Flu, an illness caused by a virus, can lead to symptoms including a sudden fever, cough, muscle ache, headache, and general weakness. The flu is spread when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks and others nearby breathe in the germ. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and can be particularly dangerous for the very young, the very old, and for those with underlying medical problems.

Prevent the Flu

1. **Get a flu shot:** A person needs to get a flu immunization every year to be fully protected. Two types of immunizations are available to protect against the flu. One is a shot given in the arm and the other is a spray given in the nose.

Those encouraged to get a flu shot are children age six months through 18 years, pregnant women, persons 50 years of age and older, residents living in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities, persons of any age with chronic medical conditions, and those who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from the flu (such as healthcare workers, household contacts, or caregivers of persons at high risk).

The flu spray immunization (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”) is approved for use in healthy people between the ages of 2 and 49 who are not pregnant. Both the spray and the injection methods can be effective at preventing the flu.

Flu immunization is not recommended for infants younger than six months of age and those who have had a severe allergic (anaphylactic) reaction to eggs or to a previous dose of a flu immunization. Persons with a history of Guillain-Barré syndrome (a severe

illness that causes paralysis) should talk to their healthcare provider before getting a flu shot.

2. **Cover your cough:** Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue every time you cough or sneeze and then throw the used tissue in a waste basket. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into your upper sleeve;
3. **Clean your hands:** Wash your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand cleaner, especially after coughing or sneezing;
4. **Limit contact:** If possible limit contact with persons who are sick or stay home when you are sick. Avoid sharing items such as eating utensils, drinking glasses, towels, or other personal items, especially with people who are ill.

Caring for People at Home with the Flu

In addition to encouraging those at risk to get a flu vaccine, the Boston Public Health Commission is also working on a statewide educational initiative, "Flu: What You Can Do," designed to teach the public how to care for loved ones at home who are sick with the flu.

These materials detail when and how to treat a fever, nasal congestion, and cough; how to take a temperature, prevent dehydration, encourage good nutrition, and provide comfort to those who are ill.

More Information

For more information, please contact the Boston Public Health Commission Communicable Disease (CDC) Division at 617-534-5611 or visit our website at <http://www.bphc.org/cdc>