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FLU WIDESPREAD IN ARIZONA

After a steady increase in flu cases this year, Arizona flu activity hit widespread this week; widespread is the highest category possible. Influenza has been reported in all 15 counties. Most of the circulating flu is the 2009 H1N1 virus. Doctor and hospital visits for flu have increased over the last few weeks around the state.

Influenza is a serious illness with symptoms similar to the common cold. However, the flu comes on quickly and is more physically draining. For most people, the best care is to stay home, rest, and drink plenty of fluids. For others, especially those with certain medical conditions, the flu can be more severe.

“Some of the symptoms of the flu are very similar to those of a cold,” said Dr. Cara Christ, Chief Medical Officer for the Department of Health Services. “Some people treat the flu like it’s a cold and continue working. The truth is influenza can be fatal. If you suddenly feel sick, tired and begin coughing and sneezing, take care of yourself. Stay home and don’t spread the virus to others. If you have a hard time breathing or have chest pains, you probably need to check with your doctor or get immediate help.”

At this time of year, urgent care sites and hospitals are overcrowded with ill people so it is important to call your doctor first unless you are severely ill. The good news is if you haven’t been sick yet, the flu shot can still offer you protection from flu. Simple, everyday prevention measures, like washing your hands, will help stop flu and other illnesses.

“Obviously, the best thing you can do to protect yourself and others is to get vaccinated. With our community reaching widespread status, this means that flu is circulating and even if you get vaccinated today, it will take 2-3 weeks to build up antibodies,” said Dr. Bob England, director of the Maricopa County Department of Public Health. “In the meantime, stay home when you are sick, wash your hands frequently and make sure to cough or sneeze into your sleeve. Simple, but tried and true public health practices.”

While Arizona typically sees most of its flu cases in February or March, flu is unpredictable and can peak earlier or later in the season. This year, flu reports started early and have been increasing over the past few weeks. 824 cases of the 2,424 we’ve had this season were reported last week. However, because many people are not tested for the flu, those figures are just a fraction of the true number of cases.

Arizona is not alone in this uptick of influenza -- 40 other states reported widespread activity last week. The official Centers for Disease Control and Prevention influenza season begins in October and carries through the following September.

A list of flu shot providers is available at www.stophespreadaz.org or by calling Community Information and Referral at 211 from anywhere in the state. For more information about influenza, go to www.azdhs.gov/flu or contact your health care provider or local health department.

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