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PROTECTING YOURSELF, YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR COMMUNITY FROM THE FLU

Flu season is just around the corner again. Now is the time to start thinking about getting your annual flu shot to protect yourself, your family, your clients, and the community where you live. Every year in the United States, 5% to 20% of the population gets the flu, more than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications, and about 36,000 people die from the flu. Uncomplicated influenza illness is characterized by the onset of fever, headache, malaise, nonproductive cough, sore throat and runny nose. Complications of the flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear and sinus infections, dehydration and worsening of chronic medical conditions such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes. This shows you why receiving your flu vaccine is so critical.

The flu virus spreads mainly from person to person through coughing or sneezing by people who are infected with the Flu virus. People may become infected by touching items or surfaces with flu viruses on them, and then touching their noses or mouths. Infected individuals may be able to infect others, beginning one day before symptoms develop, and up to five days after becoming sick. This means that you may be able to pass on the flu to someone else while you feel healthy, and before you even know you are sick, as well as when you are sick.

Flu season in the United States typically occurs during the fall or winter months, but the peak of flu activity can occur as late as April or May. During this time, flu viruses are circulating in the population. Influenza viruses can cause disease among persons in any age group, but rates of infection are highest among children. Rates of serious illness and death are highest among persons age 65 and older, children less than 2 years old and persons of any age who have medical conditions that place them at increased risk for complications from influenza.

Annual influenza vaccination is the most effective method for preventing influenza virus infection and its complications. The flu shot that you receive is an inactivated vaccine (it contains killed virus). The flu shot is approved for use in people six months of age and older, including healthy people and people with chronic medical disease. There is also a nasal spray flu vaccine that is made with live, weakened flu viruses. This vaccine is approved for use in **healthy** people from 2 to 49 years of age who are not pregnant. About two weeks after receiving your vaccination, antibodies develop in your body that protects you from influenza virus.

People who should receive the flu vaccine each year are:

- people who are 50 and older
- people with chronic or long-term health care problems
- women who are pregnant during the flu season (inactivated vaccine)
- 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 the flu such as household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu
- household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than six months of age
- health care workers
- anyone who wants to decrease their risk of influenza should also be vaccinated

PUBLIC HEALTH: PREVENT. PROMOTE. PROTECT.

- For the 2008-2009 influenza season annual vaccination of all children 5-18 years of age is recommended.
- Annual vaccination of all children six months to four years of age and older children with conditions that place them at increased risk for complications from influenza.

Practicing good hygiene is also a good way to protect you from getting the flu. This includes covering your nose or mouth when coughing and sneezing. Always discard the tissue properly. Pay attention to good hand washing and clean your hands with soap and warm water frequently for at least 15 seconds. Carrying a waterless hand gel sanitizer is also useful when water is not available. You should clean surfaces you touch frequently, such as door knobs, water faucets, refrigerator handles and telephones.

The New York State Department of Health has also stressed the importance of vaccinating all health care personnel with influenza vaccine annually. Immunization of health care workers with the flu vaccine is less than 45%. Failure to immunize health care workers in all health care facilities is a patient safety issue. Unvaccinated health care workers have been implicated in the spread of influenza and outbreaks in every type of health care setting. It is important to educate health care workers about the benefits of annual influenza vaccination and the potential health risks involved to themselves and their patients if they do not become vaccinated.

For further information about the flu, flu vaccine and immunization visit www.cdc.gov/flu or contact the Niagara County Immunization Program at 278-1903.