

# To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*

Bringing you public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health



## **Protect Yourself from Influenza**

November 3, 2014

We are fast approaching that time of year when we begin busying ourselves with plans for the upcoming holidays. As we prepare our “to do” lists, we should each of us place at the top of our list an action that may well be one of the most important gifts we can give to ourselves, our families, and our community. That action is protecting against influenza infection with an annual influenza vaccination.

Recommended for everyone six (6) months of age and older, influenza vaccination is the most effective way to protect against infection from the influenza virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that an average of 36,000 individuals die from influenza, or its complications, every year in the United States. The usual risk factors for hospitalization and death include: age under 5 years or over 65 years; being immunocompromised; or have underlying respiratory problems. However, a new strain of influenza appeared in 2009 and continues to circulate widely during flu season. This new strain of influenza virus, known as H1N1, has caused deaths in younger individuals, especially those with chronic illnesses such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

During the 2013–14 flu season, California reported 404 deaths in individuals younger than 65 years of age due to H1N1 influenza. In Fresno County, H1N1 influenza resulted in 22 deaths in individuals younger than 65 and was responsible for another 18 persons requiring intensive care unit (ICU) admission to assure their recovery.

Influenza vaccination is necessary annually for two reasons. First, the virus has an amazing ability to mutate or slightly change its form from one flu season to the next. To provide the best protection, each year’s influenza vaccine is specifically designed to match the virus strains which are likely to circulate in the coming flu season. Second, the body’s response to influenza vaccination lasts for only a limited time and repeat vaccination is required in order to maintain protection against influenza infection.

The CDC and the Advisory Committee for Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommend that everyone six (6) months of age and older receive an influenza vaccination each year. Certain individuals are especially recommended to receive the vaccination, including: those over 65 years of age; those under 5 years of age; those with cancer or who are immunocompromised; pregnant women; and those with asthma, diabetes, heart disease, or history of stroke.

It is especially important for health care workers to receive an annual influenza vaccination for three main reasons:

- It protects the health care workers and their families from influenza transmission from patients;
- It protects patients (many of whom are at increased risk of complications from influenza) from inadvertent transmission of influenza from health care workers;
- It helps to prevent absence from work of the health care worker, who is so very vital to the health and wellness of our community.

With the goal of protection from influenza infection for both health care workers and hospital patients, a health officer order for mandatory annual influenza vaccination of health care workers in acute care hospitals was issued earlier this year for Fresno County. The order will be extended to long term care facilities next year, and to all county health care facilities in the subsequent year.

There are almost no contraindications to influenza vaccination. Side effects are rare. If a side effect occurs, it is almost always minimal. Influenza vaccination cannot cause the flu. Two explanations exist as to why some individuals may have gotten ill after a recent influenza vaccination: 1) the person acquired another of the multiple viral respiratory illnesses constantly circulating in the community, or 2) the individual had already been exposed to influenza before the vaccination had sufficient time to be effective.

No shortage of influenza vaccine is anticipated this year, although there have been reported delays in delivery to some providers. Influenza vaccination opportunities are plentiful. Contact your health care provider or clinic, inquire at your local retail pharmacy, or visit one of the influenza vaccination clinics conducted by the Fresno County Department of Public Health. Influenza vaccination is available at low or no cost. Remember that after influenza vaccination, the body needs 7 - 14 days to build protection through its immune response.

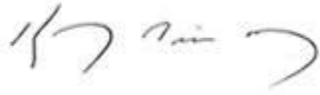
Here are some additional steps you can take to protect yourself and others from influenza, as well as other infectious illnesses:

- Wash hands thoroughly and frequently
- Cover coughs and sneezes with the crook of your elbow
- Do not touch your face, eyes, or mouth with unwashed hands
- Stay home from school or work when sick
- Regularly disinfect frequently handled surfaces and other items, such as toys

Influenza vaccination remains the single, most effective measure for protection against influenza infection.

I strongly encourage you to get your influenza vaccination today.

Here's to your health!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Bird". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "K" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Health Officer