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Public health officials: If you haven't done so, get a flu shot

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

Wash your hands, cover your cough and get your flu vaccine.

Those public health messages are being conveyed with renewed urgency this week, as flu season gets underway across the state and in New London County.

"We're bracing for it. It could get severe," said Dr. Oliver Mayorga, chief of emergency medicine at Lawrence + Memorial Hospital in New London. In the past week, doctors at the main emergency department and at Pequot Health Center in Groton have seen four confirmed cases of flu, he said. Since Nov. 1, L+M and its affiliates have seen 18 confirmed cases.

At The William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich, there have been nine confirmed flu cases in the last week at the emergency department and the hospital's affiliated physician practices, spokesman Shawn Mawhiney said. Since December, Backus doctors have seen 57 confirmed cases.

"We've definitely been seeing a spike in the flu," Mawhiney said. Along with the flu, he added, Backus has also seen several cases of norovirus, a stomach bug.

Anyone who hasn't yet received a flu shot should do so as soon as possible, Mawhiney said. The vaccine will take about two weeks to become fully protective, but it's not too late. "There's not a cure, so the best course is to prevent getting it," he said.

Symptoms can include fever and chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle and body aches, headaches, fatigue, and sometimes diarrhea, especially in children. Those infected with the virus can feel sick for a week or more.

"It does last. It lays you down for a while," said Megan Stone, nurse practitioner at United Community & Family Services in Norwich. "Anybody I know who's had the flu gets immunized, because it's not something you want to get twice."

Stone urged people to get a flu shot not only to protect themselves, but also to prevent passing flu germs to those they come in contact with, particularly the young, the elderly and those with compromised immune systems who are particularly vulnerable. Backus last year instituted a mandatory vaccination policy for all hospital staff.

As of Dec. 28, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classified Connecticut as one of the states where flu activity is "widespread," with 444 confirmed cases so far this flu season. Of those, 37 were in New London County. Statewide, 77 people have been hospitalized for flu, and one person over 50 years old has died, according to the state

Department of Public Health.

Flu season starts in October, but the majority of the cases this season have been since December.

"Influenza activity is continuing to increase in Connecticut," William Gerrish, spokesman for the state health department, said Friday. "DPH urges as yet unvaccinated Connecticut residents over the age of 6 months to get their flu vaccine now. Vaccination is the most important step in protecting against flu and its potentially serious complications."

According to the CDC, about 140 million doses of flu vaccine were available for this flu season. The current vaccine is protective against the three strains predominant this season, the CDC said. It is available at many primary care practices and pharmacies.

Dr. Ramindra Walia, chief medical officer at UCFS, said a few children have come to the clinic with severe flu symptoms, including one with a fever of 103. In most cases, the flu can be treated at home with rest and plenty of fluids, but he advises parents to seek a doctor's care if a fever lasts five to seven days.

Numbers of cases at UCFS thus far haven't been higher, Walia said, because the clinic launched an aggressive vaccination effort that resulted in about 1,000 children and 1,000 adults getting the shot this season. It just received a new supply of adult vaccine from the Uncas Health District and still has an ample supply for children, he said.

The Community Health Center, which operates clinics in New London and Groton, has also been aggressively vaccinating patients this season, said spokeswoman Eliza Cole. Thus far it has immunized 3,739 patients, including 1,283 children and teens - more than 60 percent of all its patients under age 17.

Of the confirmed flu cases statewide, most have been two H1N1 strains, the same type that caused the global pandemic in 2009 and 2010. As during the previous outbreak, most of the H1N1 infections are being seen in children and young adults, the CDC said.

Dr. Bonnie Mackenzie, a physician in the pediatric emergency department at L+M, said any child with chronic conditions such as asthma or immune or neurological disorders - as well as children under age 5 - are at increased risk of serious complications from the flu. In mild cases, children can be cared for at home with acetaminophen or ibuprofen, lots of rest and fluids and close monitoring, she said, but any children at higher risk or with severe symptoms should be seen by a doctor. Infants under 6 months old who are too young to be vaccinated are at particularly high risk, she said.

"The best thing families can do is make sure everyone in the household over 6 months is vaccinated," Mackenzie said, noting that the CDC is reporting that two children in the United States have died from the flu thus far this season.

"It's still early in the season, so it's hard to predict how it will continue to spread," Mackenzie said. "It's not too late to get vaccinated."

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