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## Flu shots in high demand as cases rise locally

By [Judy Benson](#) Day Staff Writer

A little past noon on Thursday, New London residents Norman Collins and Michelle Allen decided not to wait any longer to protect themselves from what's shaping up to be one of worst flu seasons in recent memory.

"I've been getting the flu shot the last two to three years, and I haven't gotten the flu," said Collins, who, like Allen, had gone to the CVS on Bank Street to pick up a prescription, and ended up getting the vaccine at the same time.

Allen said her daughter and granddaughter recently had been sick, and she was hoping to avoid the same fate.

Pharmacist David Dean, who administered the shots to Allen and Collins, said the past week has been especially busy with people coming for flu shots. Recent media reports about the severity of this year's flu season, including a public health emergency declared in Boston Wednesday, are prompting the influx, he said. Nationwide, according to the Centers for Disease Control, the flu is widespread in all but eight states.

"It's a heavy season," Dean said, "but it's nothing we can't handle."

Ledge Light Health District, which provides public health services to five local towns, also was giving flu shots Thursday at a clinic at its Broad Street offices. The clinic was supposed to be the last of the season, but the agency is now considering scheduling more.

"We've seen a tremendous uptick in the number of people requesting flu shots," Ledge Light epidemiologist Russell Melmed said.

This year's vaccine, experts say, is a good match for the three main strains circulating. The most prevalent strain, H3N2, has not been around for a decade, so natural immunity against it is not as strong as with other types, Melmed said.

In addition, the H3N2 strains are known to cause more severe symptoms, said Dr. Lynn Sosa, deputy state epidemiologist with the state Department of Public Health.

Statewide, she said, there were 1,680 confirmed flu cases as of Jan. 5 - up from 660 the previous week - and many more cases in residents that were not tested or seen by a doctor.

"Flu is widespread in Connecticut," she said. "We don't know yet whether it's peaked."

Those being most severely affected, Sosa said, are age 65 and older, age four and younger, and anyone with underlying medical conditions.

"All our hospitals are really busy, and the ERs have long waits," she said.

Based on the numbers of flu patients coming to United Community & Family Services in Norwich over the last two weeks, Dr. Ramindra Walia, chief medical officer at UCFS, said he believes this flu season is likely to get worse before it subsides.

"We haven't even peaked yet, I feel," he said.

His advice: "Get vaccinated. It's not too late."

Eastern Connecticut, Melmed said, at 11 percent, had the second highest rate in the state of hospital emergency room visits due to flu over the last 10 days, he said. Of the state's five public health regions, only the Hartford area had a higher percentage.

Melmed said "at least three" local nursing homes have seen "small outbreaks" of flu and instituted restrictions on visitors and activities.

Over the past week, confirmed flu cases treated by the Lawrence & Memorial Hospital emergency department jumped to 106, up from 56 a week ago, L&M spokesman Mike O'Farrell said. Eighteen people have been admitted this season for severe flu symptoms. L&M placed restrictions on visitors Jan. 2 that remains in effect.

L&M's two emergency rooms, at the main hospital in New London at the Pequot Health Center in Groton, have seen volumes 20 percent to 50 percent higher than normal for this time of year, "and a lot of it is flu," said Dr. Oliver Mayorga, chairman of emergency services at L&M.

While most people don't need to seek a doctor's care for the flu, it is causing breathing problems and pneumonia in several of the patients coming to the hospital, Mayorga said, particularly those with asthma, emphysema or other chronic conditions. For those patients, steroids, nebulizer treatments and antibiotics may be prescribed.

Other flu patients, are just seeking "supportive care" - guidance about how to take care of themselves at home - or need a doctor's note verifying their illness to get sick time off from work, Mayorga said. Those who do get the flu, he said, can expect to have to stay home for three days to a week before they're well enough to return to work or school.

"It's not quick," he said.

People who get sick with the flu should seek the care of their primary care doctor or go to the emergency room if they start feeling short of breath or if symptoms don't improve after three to four days, he said.

At The William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich, which imposed visitor restrictions in mid-December, the number of confirmed flu cases this season surpassed 200 this week, up from 148 one week ago, spokesman Shawn Mawhiney said. Thus far, 28 patients have been admitted with severe symptoms.

"It's definitely a severe season," he said.

Along with the two hospitals, local primary care clinics are also keeping very busy. Dr. Hartmut Doerwaldt of the Community Health Center in New London said patients are reporting a "sudden onset of whole body illness," with high fever of 102 or higher, headache, sore throat and muscle aches and pains. For patients who come in within the first two to three days of onset, he can prescribe Tamiflu. The antiviral is not effective,

however, if the patient has been ill longer.

He advised anyone who does get sick with the flu to stay home for at least 24 hours after they no longer have a cough or runny nose. Children may need a few extra days, he added.

"People usually feel bad for three or four days, and then it's another three or four days before they can function normally again," he said.

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FLU-GLE?

If you ask the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, this year's flu season is looking "moderately severe." That assessment has been reflected in national media coverage in recent weeks.

But wait - if you ask Google Flu Trends, we're in the midst of an outbreak that is shaping up to be the most extensive on record. Never before this week have so many people searched for the terms that Google believes are likely indicators of the influenza virus. If Google's algorithm is accurate, that should translate to a volume of doctor visits that significantly exceeds that of the H1N1 outbreak in October 2009.

- Will Oremus, Slate

IF YOU GET THE FLU

- Rest
  - Treat symptoms with over-the-counter cough medicines and decongestants. (These are not recommended for children ages four and younger.)
  - Treat fever with acetaminophen, ibuprofen or aspirin. (Aspirin is not recommended for children.)
  - Drink plenty of fluids.
  - A humidifier or vaporizer may help sooth nasal passages.
  - See a doctor if symptoms don't improve or worsen after the third or fourth day.
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