

For Immediate Release

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Influenza Causing Severe Illness *Health Officials Stress Importance of Vaccination*

YPSILANTI, Mich., Jan 8, 2014 – Health officials are reporting a rapid increase in the number of individuals seeking treatment for flu. Over 50 area residents have been hospitalized. Thirty of those hospitalizations have occurred in the last two weeks, and many hospitalized patients are younger adults. The vaccination status of all hospitalized patients is not known; however, in the cases where it is known, most are unvaccinated. Area health officials are strongly encouraging everyone six months or older to seek seasonal flu vaccination if they have not already.

"Seasonal activity has more than doubled over the past few weeks, as many more are coming to St. Joe's physician offices, urgent care centers and emergency departments with flu-like symptoms," says Dr. Anurag Malani, Medical Director, Infection Prevention & Control, Saint Joseph Mercy Health System.

Most confirmed cases have the H1N1 strain, which is included in the current seasonal vaccine. Seasonal flu vaccine is widely available throughout the area. While it can take up to two weeks after vaccination for an individual to build his or her immunity, vaccination can still provide protection this flu season. Rates of illness will likely increase as school and normal activities resume this week.

"People think that if they are young and healthy, they can just deal with the flu. Unfortunately, that isn't always true. This year's flu is hitting the 18-59 year old group particularly hard, just as it did in 2009. Fortunately, this time around we have a good vaccine. I urge everyone who can to get it," says Dr. Alice Penrose, MD, MPH, Medical Director for Washtenaw County Public Health.

The University of Michigan Health System has also reported a sharp uptick in flu activity among younger patients. U-M Health System issued a [statement](#) on Jan 3 citing more than a dozen patients in intensive care with severe flu-related illness, encouraging vaccination and restricting hospital visitors (<http://www.uofmhealth.org/news/archive/201401/flu>).

Influenza

Flu is a very contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Symptoms often include fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, headache, muscle aches and fatigue. Younger children may also experience vomiting or diarrhea, but these symptoms are not typical of adults with influenza. Annual vaccination offers the best protection against flu. If influenza is diagnosed within 48 hours of onset, antiviral medication can decrease the symptoms and length of illness and may prevent serious complications or hospitalization.

Vaccine Availability

Annual flu vaccination is recommended for everyone six months and older. Vaccine is readily available through health care providers, pharmacies and local Public Health. Residents may utilize the HealthMap Vaccine Finder <http://flushot.healthmap.org/> to identify other flu vaccine locations.

Cost

For individuals without insurance or vaccine coverage, the cost may vary. Public Health offers flu vaccine by appointment and using a sliding fee scale. The normal cost of a flu shot at Public Health is \$20. Please call 734-544-6700 to schedule. Additionally, some previously uninsured individuals may now have insurance and vaccine coverage through the Affordable Care Act.

Saint Joseph Mercy Health System strongly recommends seasonal flu vaccine to anyone who has not yet received it. It is the best defense against the flu and this year's vaccine is a good match to the H1N1 strain that is being seen in many confirmed cases. Pharmacies at St. Joseph Mercy Ann Arbor, Reichert Health Center and St. Joseph Mercy Livingston have plenty of flu vaccine available. No appointment is necessary, and most insurance is accepted.

Prevention

Flu spreads when a person who has influenza coughs, sneezes or speaks and releases viruses into the air. When these viruses enter the nose, throat or lungs of another person, they begin to multiply, causing disease. The viruses can also be spread when a person touches a surface with flu viruses on it (for example, a door handle) and then touches his or her nose or mouth. Although annual flu vaccination offers the best protection, basic prevention strategies, such as hand washing, can also reduce the spread of illness.

- Wash hands frequently, especially after coughing, sneezing and handling used tissues.
- Avoid close contact with those who have colds or flu-like symptoms. Stay away from others if you are sick.
- After contact with a person who is ill, wash your hands and keep your fingers away from your eyes, nose and mouth to prevent the spread of the virus.
- Boost your immune system by eating a healthy diet and getting regular physical activity and plenty of rest.

Visitor Restrictions

To reduce the risk of spreading illness among vulnerable patients, St. Joseph Mercy hospitals and outpatient care centers have implemented the following visitor restrictions:

- People of any age with flu-like symptoms should not visit loved ones at the hospital or accompany them to the emergency department or outpatient appointments at any Saint Joseph Mercy Health System facility.
- If you absolutely must visit the hospital or another health care setting and have flu-like symptoms, please wear a mask. Masks are available at the front desk.

About Washtenaw County Public Health

Washtenaw County Public Health promotes health and works to prevent disease or injury in our community. This includes monitoring communicable diseases, such as flu. For more information, please visit <http://publichealth.ewashtenaw.org>, or call us at 734-544-6700. Public Health is located at 555 Towner Street in Ypsilanti.



About Saint Joseph Mercy Health System

Saint Joseph Mercy Health System (SJMHS) is a health care organization serving six counties in southeast Michigan including Livingston, Macomb, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw and Wayne. It includes 537-bed St. Joseph Mercy Ann Arbor, 443-bed St. Joseph Mercy Oakland in Pontiac, 304-bed St. Mary Mercy Livonia, 136-bed St. Joseph Mercy Livingston in Howell, 119-bed St. Joseph Mercy Port Huron and 113-bed Chelsea Community Hospital. Combined, the six hospitals are licensed for 1,726 beds, have six outpatient health centers, six urgent care facilities, more than 25 specialty centers; employ more than 14,000 individuals and have a medical staff of nearly 3,200 physicians.



SJMHS is a member of CHE Trinity Health, one of the largest Catholic health care delivery systems in the nation. It serves people and communities in 21 states from coast to coast with 84 hospitals, 95 continuing care facilities and home health and hospice programs that provide nearly 2.4 million visits annually. The organization was formed by the May 2013 consolidation of Trinity Health and Catholic Healthcare East. For more information on health services offered at Saint Joseph Mercy Health System, please visit www.stjoeshealth.org.

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