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Health Department focusing on education as flu season approaches

With the beginning of a new school year, the Oak Park Public Health Department has stepped up efforts to educate local schools officials on how to lessen the impact of a potential H1N1 (swine) flu outbreak.

Health Department officials have met with both public and private school representatives to discuss strategies that may help limit the spread of H1N1 – as well as seasonal flu – during the school year ahead.

“The Centers for Disease Control anticipates an increase in illness after the school year starts, because flu typically is transmitted more easily in the fall and winter when we are more closed in,” said Oak Park Public Health Director Margaret Provost-Fyfe. “Parents and school staff can help keep kids healthy by practicing prevention, close monitoring and using common sense, such as keeping anyone ill with flu-like symptoms at home until they are fever-free for 24 hours.”

In addition to schools, the Health Department also has made information on H1N1 prevention available to businesses and employers in the Village and will be working with childcare centers and other places where H1N1 might quickly spread.

According to Provost-Fyfe, the CDC is developing a vaccine for H1N1 that will be separate from the seasonal flu vaccine, but it may not be available until late October. She stressed that the H1N1 vaccine is not intended to replace the seasonal flu vaccine – it is meant to be used in addition to the traditional flu shot. The seasonal flu vaccine typically is one shot, but the H1N1 vaccine is expected to require two shots given on separate occasions.

While the Health Department awaits word from the CDC on an H1N1 vaccine and how it will be administered, plans are underway to offer the regular seasonal flu vaccination clinics by appointment again this year. Clinics are scheduled for 1 – 4 p.m., Oct. 1 in the Main Oak Park Fire Station, 100 N. Euclid Ave.; 4 – 7 p.m., Oct. 6, in Village Hall, 123 Madison St.; and 4 – 7 p.m., Oct. 12, at the Oak Park Conservatory, 615 Garfield Ave. Residents should call 708.358.5601 to schedule an appointment, since walk-ins will not be accepted.

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Flu education
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“The Health Department is encouraging everyone to get a seasonal influenza flu shot this year as soon as it is available,” Provost-Fyfe said. “Getting a flu shot is the best way to protect against becoming ill with the seasonal flu.”

Other prevention tips for minimizing the chances of getting the flu include:

- *Practice good hand hygiene.* Wash your hands often with soap and water – especially after coughing or sneezing. Alcohol-based hand cleaners also are effective.
- *Practice respiratory etiquette.* The main way the flu spreads is from person to person in the droplets produced by coughs and sneezes, so it is important to cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your elbow or shoulder, not into your hands.
- *Stay home if you're sick.* Staying at home means that individuals with the flu keep their viruses to themselves rather than sharing them with others.

For more information on H1N1, seasonal flu or shot clinics, contact the Oak Park Department of Public Health at health@oak-park.us or 708.358.5480.

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