

CITY OF BALTIMORE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Baltimore City Health Department Announces Citywide Flu Alert

(Baltimore, MD) December 18, 2007-- As part of its plan for seasonal flu announced November 8, the Baltimore City Health Department has raised the City's level from "Minimal Flu" to "Flu Alert." This level means there is strong evidence that influenza is now spreading in Baltimore.

This evidence includes:

- The first lab-confirmed case of influenza in Baltimore City reported on December 6.
- Over the past two weeks, the percentage of positive "rapid" influenza tests reported by Baltimore City sentinel laboratories increased from zero to 16%.
- The percentage of visits to Baltimore City sentinel healthcare providers for flu-like illness increased over the last week, from 2.1% to 7.1% of all visits.

"We are now at the second level of Baltimore's Seasonal Flu Plan, which is Flu Alert," explains Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein, Baltimore's Commissioner of Health. "Everybody should take steps to reduce their risk of contracting the flu."

The Health Department is making several urgent recommendations to save lives during this flu season:

1. Get the flu vaccine! Call 311 for help locating a free vaccine clinic or call your doctor. The flu vaccine is especially recommended for children six months to five years, pregnant or breastfeeding women, persons over age 50 or with chronic medical conditions, and those who live in long term care facilities. Household contacts of these at-risk groups, including parents and caregivers of children less than 6 months, should also be vaccinated.
2. All eligible health care workers who have not yet been vaccinated should receive the flu vaccine as soon as possible.
3. Good hand hygiene is important. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water or use a hand sanitizer before meals, after coughing or sneezing or using the restrooms, and when talking with people who are ill.
4. Cough and sneeze into a sleeve or tissue, and keep hands away from mouth, nose and eyes.
5. When you or your child are ill, stay home whenever possible.

These recommendations and other important information are included in “It’s Flu Season” cards that are now being distributed around the City. Flu cards can be requested at 410-396-4387.

Because of the Flu Alert, the Health Department will increase its flu surveillance and publish weekly updates regarding 911 and emergency room chief complaints, hospital crowding, the number of positive influenza cases and flu outbreaks.

"It is important that children get the flu vaccine every year, both for their own health and those more vulnerable to illness around them," says Dr. George Siberry, Medical Director of the Harriet Lane Clinic at Johns Hopkins Children’s Center.

“Children under the age of 8 should receive two doses of flu vaccine the first year they get the vaccine, or if they only had one dose of vaccine in the past,” reminds Dr. Kwang Sik Kim, Director, Pediatric Infectious Diseases at Hopkins Children’s.

“Vaccination is the best way to limit the spread of flu, and its severity,” states Dr. Anne Bailowitz, Bureau Chief for Child Health and Immunization. “Free flu vaccines are still available for children and adults in the City.”

For the flu vaccine schedule, the Seasonal Flu Plan, and the weekly surveillance reports, go to www.baltimorehealth.org/flu. Information on flu vaccines is also available by calling 311 or the Bureau of Child Health and Immunization at 410-396-4454.

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