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January 7, 2015

PRESS RELEASE-For Immediate Release

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What the Public Should Know About the Current Flu Season

TWIN FALLS – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported widespread influenza activity in a majority of the United States. With flu-related deaths on the rise and questions about the effectiveness of the vaccine, South Central Public Health District (SCPHD) wants to remind the public the importance of still getting vaccinated and some facts about this year's flu season.

“Epidemic can be an alarming word, but it really means that a certain disease, in this case seasonal flu, is making a widespread occurrence. As a public health agency we work diligently to keep a close eye on flu activities within our communities and on educating the public,” said Cheryle Becker, SCPHD Family and Children's Health Division Administrator. “We realize that the public is questioning the effectiveness of this year's flu vaccine. Every year the CDC studies samples of circulating flu viruses and tries to match up the next year's vaccine. Unfortunately, flu viruses change constantly; they most often change from one season to the next and they can even change within the course of the flu season.”

A flu virus changing is known as “drift” and according to the CDC, because of this occurrence, there is always the possibility of a less than optimal match between circulating viruses and the viruses in the vaccine. So many people ask “can the vaccine provide protection even if the vaccine is not a good match?”

“It is important to remember that the flu vaccine contains three or four flu viruses so even if there is a less than ideal match or lower effectiveness against one virus, the vaccine may protect against the other viruses and prevent serious complications from influenza in many people” says Becker.

The CDC continues to recommend flu vaccination for everyone 6 months and older. Vaccination is particularly important for people at high risk for serious flu complications (the elderly, children under the age of two, people with chronic health conditions such as those involving the lungs and heart, diabetes or cancer and pregnant women). Medication is available to help shorten the duration of influenza symptoms. This medication must be started within the first 2 days of symptoms to be most effective. Persons with high risk medical conditions may check with their doctor about obtaining the medication even if they have been sick for more than 2 days.

Last fall, SCPHD hosted flu clinics in several Senior Centers throughout south central Idaho and offered FluMist for children at several schools and still has a limited amount of vaccine available for anyone interested in getting vaccinated.

The flu virus is contagious and spreads quickly, particularly in group settings such as schools and workplaces. The flu is contagious before symptoms start, so practicing good hygiene at all times can help prevent its spread. SCPHD recommends people:

- Get a flu vaccination.
- Wash hands often and particularly after sneezing and coughing.
- Avoid touching their eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Cover their coughs and sneezes or cough into their sleeve.
- Stay home when sick.

Visit phd5.idaho.gov for the latest on the flu epidemic and clinic schedules.

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