

This is an Official Montana State DPHHS HAN Advisory

Distributed via the DPHHS Health Alert Network (HAN) System
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Montana's First Confirmed Case of Influenza

The Montana Public Health Laboratory has confirmed a influenza A virus by PCR, Montana's first confirmed case of influenza this season. The patient is an elderly resident of Cascade County with an onset of illness on November 3 and no travel history outside the area. The patient is currently hospitalized and the county is in the process of determining the patient's vaccination status.

Montana's first cases of influenza are typically identified between mid-November and mid-December. Several neighboring states (WY, ID, ND, SD) have reported sporadic cases of influenza in recent weeks. More on recent influenza activity at the national level can be found at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/>

As a reminder: As part of our influenza surveillance effort, the state lab and epi programs are supporting a limited number of influenza tests. To definitively diagnose the presence of influenza and better characterize what is circulating, it is important to confirm the first few positive influenza cases in each county or tribal area by culture and/or PCR.

We are asking local health authorities to encourage providers and labs to submit samples on individuals strongly suspected of having influenza (people testing positive on rapid tests are ideal candidates) to our lab for more complete testing. The cost for testing will be supported until *two specimens from each county/tribal area* are confirmed at the state laboratory. After two cases from each area are confirmed, your agency will be notified that further testing will not be provided free of charge. Despite the availability of rapid diagnostic tests, collecting clinical specimens for viral culture is critical, because only culture isolates can provide specific information regarding circulating strains and subtypes of influenza viruses. More on testing and current methods is available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/labdiagnosis.htm>.

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Contact: Jim Murphy, Disease Surveillance Specialist, DPHHS, 406-444-0274
Gayle Shirley, Public Information Officer, DPHHS, 406-444-2596

First Case of 'Homegrown' Flu Confirmed

A Cascade County woman in her 70s has become the first Montanan to have a confirmed case of "homegrown, garden-variety" flu this season, state health officials said Wednesday.

The woman has been hospitalized. Health officials said she has not traveled recently outside Cascade County, indicating that the virus is circulating locally.

"This shouldn't be confused with the bird flu that's been making headlines lately," said Jim Murphy, disease surveillance specialist with the state Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). "This is just your usual homegrown, garden-variety flu that we see every year."

In a typical year, 5 to 20 percent of Montanans--45,000 to 180,000 people--can expect to get the flu, Murphy said. Most suffer fairly mild symptoms, but the disease can be deadly among vulnerable populations, such as the very young, the very old, and those who have compromised immune systems. Nationwide, about 36,000 people die of flu each year.

“This marks the beginning of the flu season,” Murphy said. “It typically begins in Montana somewhere between mid-November and mid-December and ends in January or early February.”

State health officials urged Montanans to take the following precautions to help limit the spread of the disease:

- Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently, especially after contact with anyone who may be ill;
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing;
- Stay home from work, school or day care when you're sick;
- Avoid large gatherings when you're sick;
- Get plenty of rest;
- Eat nutritious foods and drink plenty of fluids; and
- Get a flu shot.

Although some Montana communities have experienced uneven distribution of flu vaccine this year, state health officials expect adequate supplies to be available in coming weeks.

“Flu vaccine is slowly making its way to county health departments, doctors’ offices, and hospitals,” said Joyce Burgett, head of the Immunization Program at DPHHS. “Some vaccine manufacturers are still shipping their orders, and we expect a significant portion of vaccine to arrive in Montana in November, December, and January.”

Burgett recommended that Montanans watch their local newspapers for flu vaccine clinics or periodically check with their physician or local health department to find out about vaccine availability.

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The goal Montana's Health Alert Network is to transmit information to local public health authorities as quickly as possible, and assign a suitable priority to the message that is sensitive to the impact of a health-related event providing information of immediate utility relative to the public health and safety of Montanans. For questions or comments relative to Montana's HAN system you may contact the Montana State HAN Coordinator Jim Aspevig at <<mailto:jaspevig@mt.gov>> or the Associate HAN Coordinator Gerry Wheat at <<mailto:gwheat@mt.gov>>

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

Info Service Message: provides general information regarding a situation or opportunity; does not typically require immediate action.

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