



February 8, 2008

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Re: Seasonal influenza prevention: It is not too late to vaccinate

Although flu season started slowly, North Carolina and other states are now experiencing rapid increases in seasonal influenza activity. We want to remind you that it is not too late to vaccinate to help prevent this disease as flu season can extend until May.

Influenza is not the same as the common cold—it is more severe. Each year seasonal influenza kills an average of 36,000 people in the United States and approximately 1,000 in North Carolina. Most of these deaths occur among elderly persons, but occasionally infants and children become seriously ill and sometimes die. Moreover, infected children play a major role in the spread of flu in communities. We need your help to address this concern.

We strongly recommend all eligible children be vaccinated against influenza. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) particularly recommends flu vaccination for:

- Healthy children 6 months of age up through their 5th birthday,
- Older children with health problems that flu can make worse, such as lung or heart disease or diabetes, and
- Child care providers and close household contacts of children 5 and younger.

Flu vaccination is regarded as the best way to prevent flu in individuals, and it can also help slow the spread in communities. Flu vaccines usually become available widely in the fall, but vaccination now remains a recommended way to reduce risk of illness. Two formulations are available: an injection (the “flu shot”) and a nasal spray (FluMist[®]) that involves no needles. Both are approved for most children. Children aged 6 months through 9 years who have never been vaccinated will need two doses. Protection generally begins approximately two weeks after vaccination.

In addition to vaccination, students ill with flu or other illnesses should stay home (“voluntary isolation”), and persons exposed to flu should consider the likelihood that they may become ill themselves within a few days. It’s well-known that one person’s flu illness often spreads to others in the same household. Persons who develop severe illness should consult their medical care provider.

In addition to vaccination and voluntary isolation, all persons should practice good personal hygiene—especially when ill. Covering one’s mouth and nose with a tissue while coughing or sneezing, or turning one’s head to cough or sneeze into one’s shoulder can help limit the spread of germs to people nearby. Hand washing to remove germs from hands is a well-known and important method to practice disease prevention we especially encourage during cold and flu seasons.

Please contact your child’s health care provider or local health department for influenza vaccine information. Your child’s school nurse may also be a source of information.

Sincerely,

Dr. Leah Devlin
North Carolina State Health Director

June St. Clair Atkinson
North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction