

News Release

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Influenza more of a threat to locals than new coronavirus

While the coronavirus has captured the national headlines this past week, it is seasonal influenza that is making local residents sick. Since Christmas, reported cases of influenza have increased five-fold in Knox County.

According to Epidemiologist Adam Masters with the Knox County Health Department, there have been 225 reported cases of the flu since the end of December, with 149 of those cases reported in the past two weeks. Masters said the cases are reported to the health department by local healthcare providers including Knox Community Hospital.

Flu cases in Ohio normally peak between December and February. The current number of reported cases is average for this time of the year, “but is surprising considering we did not start to see reported cases until about 8 weeks into the flu season,” said Masters. He also cautioned that there are probably more people sick than what the numbers indicate. “Not everyone who gets sick goes to the doctor’s office or the E.R. so there are a lot of cases that don’t get counted.”

The recent increase in flu cases caused one local elementary to be closed on Friday and several local businesses have indicated increased absenteeism due to the flu. “It’s a good thing to stay home when you have the flu,” said Lisa Dudgeon, RN, communicable disease nurse for the health department. “We applaud the school for closing when there were already so many students and staff out sick. Staying home prevents you from passing on the illness to others and gives your body time to rest and heal.”

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Of the reported cases, 19 people in Knox County have been hospitalized. So far, there have been no deaths attributed to the flu in Knox County.

Flu vaccine effectiveness estimates are not available yet this season, but several local healthcare providers report that routine signs and symptoms have been less severe for those patients who did get a flu shot, said Dudgeon.

“Even if you come down with the flu, getting a flu shot can still help lessen the severity of the flu, and reduce the chance of experiencing severe complications, said Dudgeon. “Getting the flu shot can also reduce the length of time you are sick if you do get the flu.”

Flu vaccine is still available at the health department and several local pharmacies. Dudgeon said it’s not too late to get a flu shot, especially if you are traveling or plan to be at events where there are lots of people, like concerts, shopping malls or sporting events.

“The virus is very contagious. It is spread through droplets that can come from sneezes, coughs or contact with an infected surface.” If someone is starting to develop symptoms like a high fever, muscle aches and chills they should consider seeing a healthcare provider, said Dudgeon. “The sooner it can be diagnosed, the sooner it can be treated and hopefully there will be fewer complications.”

While vaccination provides the greatest protection against the flu, other effective ways to avoid getting or spreading it include: washing your hands frequently; covering coughs and sneezes with tissues, or coughing or sneezing into elbows; avoiding touching eyes, nose and mouth; and staying home when sick and until fever-free for 24 hours without using fever-reducing medication.

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