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Seniors among Groups Hardest Hit by Flu this Season

For most people, getting the flu means feeling achy and feverish for a week or so. But for people 65 years and older, the flu can be much more serious. This season is no exception. This week, CDC reported the highest hospitalization rates in the elderly since the agency began tracking this information during the 2005-2006 flu season, and CDC is urging seniors to take prompt action to protect against serious flu illness.

Experts estimate that each year about 60 percent of flu-related hospitalizations in the United States occur in people 65 and older. However, the number of people 65 years of age and older who become ill and are hospitalized each season can vary widely based on the intensity and extent of flu activity. Flu-related hospitalizations among people 65 and older in the United States have increased significantly in recent weeks. In fact, as of January 25, CDC has reported five times more hospitalizations than last season among people 65 and older. This shows just how severe this flu season has been for seniors.

In this context, CDC urges seniors to take action to protect against serious flu illness this season. CDC recommends annual flu vaccination as the first and best step in helping to prevent influenza.

"It's important that seniors get vaccinated to help protect against flu illness, but we know that the flu vaccine varies in how well it works and that people's immune systems weaken with age. So older adults may not respond as well to vaccination as young, healthy adults," says Dr. Alicia Fry, with CDC's Influenza Division. "Therefore, all seniors may be at risk of getting sick with the flu, even those who got vaccinated. In addition, because flu infection can be so serious in this group of people, it's important that they seek medical treatment as soon as symptoms appear."

According to Fry, while older adults often delay seeking medical treatment, the treatment for flu – antiviral drugs – works best when started as soon as possible after symptoms develop. Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines that can shorten the time of illness and lessen symptoms, but most importantly, they can reduce serious complications from flu infection, including hospitalizations, intensive care unit (ICU) admissions and deaths.

"In the clinical setting," Fry says, "there is evidence that these drugs can make a difference between a milder illness and a hospital stay."

Flu symptoms include fever, extreme tiredness, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose and muscle aches, but Fry notes that people 65 and older may not develop a fever with the flu, making the disease harder to detect in this age group. "The message we want to get out to people 65 and older who get flu symptoms is: don't wait, get medical attention. Flu is not something you need to suffer through, and it is too dangerous to wait. Call your doctor and seek treatment right away."

In addition to early treatment with antiviral drugs, CDC reminds everyone to take everyday actions to keep from getting sick with the flu. "The most important of these everyday actions is staying away from others who are or may be sick," Fry says. "There

is a lot of flu out there right now," says Fry. "So if your grandchildren or other family members are sick with flu-like symptoms, consider waiting to see them until they recover."

Other everyday preventive actions include staying home when you are sick (except to seek medical care), covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue, and washing your hands with soap and water frequently.