

Flu not a crisis in county, experts say

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/011713/fluSM.png> **But national epidemic still has local residents lining up for vaccinations**

Like many people throughout the country, Ozaukee County residents are lining up to get their flu shots in hopes of warding off the bug that is running rampant in most states.

Last Friday, almost 40 people stopped at the Ozaukee County Public Health Department to get a flu shot, Director Kirsten Johnson said.

“On a normal day, we have about 10 people getting the shot,” she said.

That increased number may have been spurred by a report on the NBC National News broadcast from Port Washington outlining efforts by Allen Edmonds Shoe Corp. to prevent employees from getting the flu, Johnson said.



So far this season, the department has given out 2,700 flu vaccinations, Johnson said,

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compared to 3,400 all of last season.

The flu, as anyone who has read or heard the news lately knows, is considered epidemic throughout the country.

But that's not necessarily the case in Ozaukee County, Johnson said.

"We're not worse than anywhere else," she said, although many people are worried about the flu.

That was reiterated by Port Washington-Saukville School District Nurse Kymber McCutcheon.

"We're actually doing well," McCutcheon said. "We don't have any epidemic of absenteeism due to it.

"Before Christmas, we were probably a little sick, but that wasn't necessarily due to the flu."

There were a handful of confirmed cases then, McCutcheon said, but many people were out with other illnesses as well.

"The people who have gotten it have been quite ill," McCutcheon said.

That's not to say there aren't cases of flu here. Rajeev Seth, medical director for the emergency department at Aurora Medical Center in Grafton, said the hospital has seen cases since mid-December.

"There's no doubt we're in flu season," he said. "Our numbers are definitely rising."

It may seem worse than usual because last year's flu season, which runs to March, was relatively mild, Seth said.

"I think people kind of forget what it was like," he said. "So far, it doesn't seem like this flu is any worse than previous flus."

Many of the people who come to the emergency room with the flu have other conditions affected by the virus, such as elderly people who have lung disease, Seth said.

"These are the individuals who require a hospital admission," he said. Most people who have the flu are treated on an outpatient basis, told to drink plenty of fluids, take Tylenol or ibuprofen for their fever and rest.

The major symptoms of the flu are a fever of 100.6 or higher, body aches, chills and nausea or vomiting, Seth said.

"It is a virus," he said. "It does take time to recover."

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For most people, that means seven to 10 days, Seth said, adding that during the duration they should drink plenty of fluids and rest.

For people who have had their flu shots but still catch the disease, the duration is generally only three to five days, Seth said.

“We still recommend people get the flu shot,” he said, adding it takes two weeks to fully take effect.

“We’ve still got six to eight weeks left (in the flu season). We encourage everyone to get a flu shot. It’s not too late. If you get immunized, you can still be protected for six weeks.”

Although rumors abound that the supply of flu vaccine is low, both Seth and Johnson said that isn’t true. Aurora and the county health department still have adequate supplies of the vaccine, they said.

Schools — a place where germs are spread readily and diseases like the flu tend to hit staff members and students quickly — have encouraged their staff members to get the flu shot and take precautions, McCutcheon said.

“We really do encourage people to be attentive to hand washing, sneezing into sleeves, using Kleenex,” she said. “Hand washing is huge.”

Seth concurred, adding that people who are ill are also encouraged to isolate themselves so they don’t spread the virus.

The county’s first case of the flu was reported in late November, Johnson said, and about 14 people have been hospitalized for the flu or complications of the flu since mid-December.

Image Information: OZAUKEE COUNTY public health nurses like Caralee Jacque continue to be busy administering flu shots. Photo by Sam Arendt