

Flu season taking its time reaching Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

It's beginning to feel and sound a little like flu season.

"Although seasonal influenza seems to be hitting other parts of the country early this year, we have had very low rates of influenza so far in Tahoe," Greg Bergner, physician at Barton Urgent Care, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is reporting a high number of flu cases in Southern states.

Typically Lake Tahoe's flu season goes from before Christmas to late March or early April.



A South Lake Tahoe boy winces when receiving the mist vaccine during a previous flu season. Photo/LTN file

While the flu can be deadly, that's not usually the case in

the basin.

“It is very rare for anyone from Tahoe to die from influenza for a number of reasons. Because of Tahoe’s geographic isolation, our altitude, and our rougher winter weather we have fewer patients living here with serious chronic diseases,” Bergner explained. “Tahoe’s population is generally healthier and consequently less likely to die from influenza infections. Also, children less than 2 years with any serious health conditions are normally transported promptly to tertiary care facilities, where the full cadre of pediatric subspecialty care is available.”

The flu and colds are different animals, though some of the symptoms are the same. Doctors can perform a test to tell the difference. Flu can sometimes be treated with anti-viral medication. Drugs are the most beneficial if taken within the first 72 hours.

“Influenza is nasty. Typically it includes a bad headache, light sensitivity, unusually bad muscle aches, a cough and fever. The common cold has similar symptoms, but in lesser severity,” Bergner said.

Doing all the things mom said to do is what the doc recommends – get plenty of sleep, drink lots of fluids, and Advil or Tylenol will help with the headache and/or fever.

“Although the influenza A virus of today is much like a ‘nasty cold’, the concern from public health officials stems from the possibility that the virus can someday mutate into a much more virulent viral strain, with a much higher death rate,” Bergner said.

Of course, there is always the flu shot or nasal spray to help ward off the chance of getting sick. Through the years Barton officials have noticed a steady increase in the number of people opting for a dose of prevention.

But it's not an exact science when it comes to developing the vaccine each year.

"The flu shots clearly work and have been scientifically proven to do so. The problem is that the influenza virus has a propensity to change its molecular shape periodically. This change in viral shape can make a vaccine less effective, though not totally ineffective," Bergner said. "The vaccine must be modeled a year in advance in order it to be manufactured and then distributed. This means that there is always a possibility that the vaccine won't be as effective as hoped, if the virus changes its shape in that intervening time."

This is the first year El Dorado County Public Health is mandating healthcare workers wear masks while providing patient care if they have not been immunized for influenza. Vaccinated Barton staff members have a bright green sticker on their ID badge.

Here are tips for not getting and not spreading the flu:

- Don't visit hospitalized patients if you are ill – especially if you have respiratory symptoms.
- If you visit any health care facility with flu-like symptoms, ask for a mask.
- Get immunized with the influenza vaccine.
- Wash your hands often.
- If you have the flu or any other respiratory illness, be sure to cough or sneeze into your elbow.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home from work, school and other activities if you are sick.

Who should be immunized:

- Children aged 6 months to 18 years receiving long-term aspirin therapy and who therefore might be at risk for experiencing Reye syndrome after influenza virus infection;
- Residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities;
- American Indians/Alaska Natives;
- People who are morbidly obese (body-mass index is 40 or greater);
- Health-care personnel;
- Household contacts and caregivers of children aged younger than 5 years and adults aged 50 years and older, with particular emphasis on vaccinating contacts of children aged younger than 6 months;
- Household contacts and caregivers of persons with medical conditions that put them at higher risk for severe complications from influenza.

Those who should not be vaccinated:

- People who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs;
- People who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination;
- Children younger than 6 months of age (influenza vaccine is not approved for children in this age group);
- People who have a moderate to severe illness with a fever (they should wait until they recover to get vaccinated);
- A history of Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks following receipt of influenza vaccine is a precaution for the use of influenza vaccine.

