

With the seasonal flu season soon approaching, New Jersey Health and Senior Services Commissioner Fred M. Jacobs, M.D., J.D. is encouraging all state residents to be vaccinated against influenza and to practice good hygiene habits to reduce the spread of flu, colds and respiratory illnesses.

"Plenty of vaccine is available," Dr. Jacobs said. "It's the best protection against the flu. I recommend vaccination to anyone who wants to decrease their risk, and especially those at high risk for complications from flu."

High risk groups include people aged 50 and older, those with chronic illnesses such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes, pregnant women and children age six months to five years, according to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. In addition, people who live with or care for others at high risk for flu complications should be vaccinated to reduce the risk of infecting their families and co-workers.

Seasonal influenza is a contagious respiratory viral illness. On average each year, five to 20 percent of the U.S. population gets the flu. More than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications, including 20,000 children, and 36,000 people die.

Despite the fact that vaccine has been readily available, data recently released by the CDC indicates that vaccination coverage levels against influenza and pneumococcal disease -- which also causes respiratory infections -- remain seriously low, leaving many unprotected and at risk for severe complications.

Although influenza does not typically peak until February, the season can peak earlier. Dr. Jacobs is asking healthcare professionals in New Jersey to administer vaccine from now through January and even later. "We need to think outside the box about the timing of flu vaccines," Dr. Jacobs said. "We urge healthcare providers to offer vaccine to their patients at any point in the flu season, not just in the fall."

The CDC is working to increase vaccinations among healthcare workers, who are also at high risk and have historically low levels of vaccination.

The DHSS is asking healthcare workers – and caregivers of high risk individuals – to make flu vaccination a priority. "Those who are in contact with sick people every day owe it to themselves to make a point of getting flu vaccine," said Dr. Eddy Bresnitz, State Epidemiologist/Deputy Commissioner. "In the process, they contribute to reducing the spread of influenza."

The Department advises residents to observe good hygiene practices like covering coughs and sneezes. Wash hands frequently throughout the day and, if possible, avoid contact with those who are sick. Stay home from work or school if you have a cold or flu.

For information about seasonal flu, visit the DHSS website at www.nj.gov/health/flu. Materials are available for the general public and for healthcare workers on preventing the spread of flu, respiratory hygiene and hand washing. These materials are downloadable and can be printed for distribution at school and work. A limited quantity of print materials is available upon request by calling 609-588-7500.