Flu activity increasing,

stay safe by getting flu shot,

washing hands and

covering coughs

By Sheri Hink

The Wauneta Breeze

Health agencies including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), American Red Cross and, locally, Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) have reported widespread influenza activity throughout the nation as well as in southwest Nebraska.

Myra Stoney, Director of SWNPHD, said flu is currently very widespread in the eight counties (Chase, Dundy, Frontier, Furnas, Hayes, Hitchcock, Perkins and Red Willow) within the SWNPHD district. Within Nebraska she said flu-like activity is increasing in some districts while decreasing in others.

Stoney reported the health department is seeing flu in several pockets throughout the health district in schools as well as an increase of hospital admissions for flu-like symptoms. There has also been an increase in positive laboratory tests for flu in the region.

Stoney's advice on how to avoid passing on the flu? "If you have a fever, stay home," she said.

Stoney said a common misconception she's seen is when individuals take a fever-reducing medication and then go to work or school.

"Taking a fever reducing medication does not mean you're not contagious. You need to be fever free for 24 hours before returning to school or work," explained Stoney.

Furthermore, the CDC says

most healthy adults can infect others with the flu beginning one day before symptoms develop and up to five to seven days after becoming sick. The CDC says some people, especially young children and those with weakened immune systems, can be infectious for even longer.

The best way to prevent passing along the flu is to stay home when a fever is present and to cover coughs with an elbow or shoulder, not with the hand.

High risk populations

According to the CDC, children under five, adults over 65 and pregnant women are considered as high risk for developing flu-related complications.

Last week, Nebraska Health and Human Services issued a press release stating that two individuals, a child and a man in his 60s, had died from the flu.

“While most children and adults recover from the flu, this is a sad reminder of how serious it can be,” says Dr. Joann Schaefer, Chief Medical Officer and Director of Public Health for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. “Unfortunately, it’s not unusual for there to be some child deaths during a normal flu season, but they have been extremely rare in Nebraska.”

Nationally 68,000 deaths each year are caused by the flu, said Stoney.

Children can be more susceptible to flu complications. Nationally, 18 children have died from flu this season, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Vaccination is one of the best ways to protect children from the flu.

Stoney said the national goal is to have 70 percent of the population get their flu shot each year, but that in SWNPHD’s district they are seeing less than 30 percent of the population getting a flu shot.

Flu is respiratory disease, not a stomach illness

Stoney said many people confuse the flu as a stomach virus. The CDC describes influenza (flu) as a respiratory disease with symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, muscle or body aches, headaches and fatigue.

The CDC reports that although oftentimes people use the term “stomach flu” to describe

nausea, vomiting or diarrhea, these symptoms are caused by many different viruses, bacteria or parasites.

Although these symptoms can be present with the flu, it is more commonly seen in children than adults and these symptoms are rarely the main symptoms of the flu.

Flu shot myths

Stoney said one of the common myths about flu shots is that vaccinations can cause a person to get the flu.

The CDC assures consumers that the flu shot is safe. “The influenza viruses contained in a flu shot are inactivated (killed), which means they cannot cause infection,” says the CDC’s website.

Stoney said that usually if someone experiences flu-like symptoms after receiving the vaccine it is because they had already been exposed to the flu. She said it takes an average of two weeks for someone to build up immunity to the virus after being vaccinated.

Action items

The CDC recommends flu vaccination for everyone 6 months and older. State health officials say it’s not too late to get the flu vaccine, in fact, they urge the public to get vaccinated.

In addition to vaccination, one of the most recommended forms of flu prevention from all sources is as simple as hand washing.

Below are additional action items suggested by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

- Wash your hands often
- Avoid contact with people who are sick
- Stay home from work, family gatherings and social functions if you’re sick
- Cover your mouth and nose when you cough with a tissue or sleeve, not your hands
- Eat healthy and get plenty of rest
- Don’t smoke

Additional information about influenza and its prevention is available at www.flu.gov.