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Seniors and the Flu

Older adults need to take caution

By Jean Jeffers, Staff Writer

Winter weather is fraught with risk for the elderly. Low temperatures, icy and slick sidewalks and snow all are cause for caution for this demographic.

And flu is one more thing seniors need to be careful about.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says influenza, also known as the flu, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by the flu virus. Flu is common to all age groups, but older adults are more likely to suffer from complications than younger people. Ninety percent of flu-related deaths occur in

those over age 65 years, and half of hospitalizations related to the flu are in this age group.

Every senior needs to know flu shots are available. All people age 65 years or older, people in nursing homes and anyone with heart, lung or kidney disease or those with other chronic diseases should be vaccinated.

The flu season begins in October, peaks in December through February and ends in May. To get the full effect of a flu vaccination, get your shot early in October. If you forget, it still may be obtained later. It takes two weeks for the vaccine to take effect.

Flu is different than a cold. According to the CDC, some symptoms of flu include:

- Fever or feeling feverish/chills
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- Fatigue

Some people have nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, though this is more common in children.

Complications may occur, including pneumonia, bronchitis and sinus and ear infections. The flu may make chronic health problems worse, according to the CDC. For instance, you may suffer asthma attacks while

dealing with the flu. Congestive heart failure may worsen if this condition is triggered by the flu.

The CDC says emergency warning signs of flu in adults are difficult breathing or shortness of breath; pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen; sudden dizziness; compression; severe or persistent vomiting; and flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and cough.

Most people who get the flu have a mild case that does not require medical follow-up. If, however, you have symptoms of the flu and are in a high-risk group such as seniors, you should contact your health care provider for an examination and possible medication. You may need antiviral drugs to treat the flu. Antiviral drugs are prescription medications such as Tamiflu. They may make the illness milder and shorten the number of days you are sick. They may also prevent severe flu complications. These drugs should be given early in the course of the illness.

In addition to antiviral medications, seniors with the flu should get plenty of rest, keep fluid intake up and stay home. Frequent hand washing and keeping your hands away from your mouth and nose and eyes is always recommended.

Don't delay. If you have not

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