

TAOS, N.M. – In 2012, the number of people who died from the flu has been three times higher than any other year on record. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that 39 states have seen a spike in flu deaths and that this year 1,826 people have died from the virus as of Dec. 13th and that could be just the beginning.

The CDC also points to worrisome trends among groups at increased risk for getting sick with influenza: young children under age five, adults aged 65 or older and pregnant women. The CDC recommends that everyone over the age of six months get a flu vaccination or antiviral medication to protect themselves from getting sick.

In New Mexico, the number of flu-associated deaths has been up this year, but it's been at a much lower rate compared to other years. The fatalities have been among children under five, adults aged 65 or older and pregnant women. In 2012, there were 24 flu-associated deaths in New Mexico.

October brought a spike in deaths from the flu to the community hospital where Dr. Pablo Cuervo works. Then a week or so later numbers were up again. "We had an early spike in October, but we had a second one in December," Cuervo said.

The spike in deaths appears to be driven by three factors: The H3N2 strain of the flu is causing more severe disease than usual for this time of year; people tend to gather together in large groups during the holidays and that increases their interaction with infectious people; and perhaps most importantly, fewer people are getting flu shots this year.

Because the H3N2 strain tends to cause more severe illness and can lead to death, particularly among infants under six months old and elderly adults over 65, Cuervo recommends that pregnant women get vaccinated against influenza. He said community-wide outbreaks are more common when H3N2 is the predominant virus.

"The bottom line is that people should get vaccinated regardless of their immune status or their age or what's going around," Cuervo said. "It really protects against the most severe outcomes of influenza infection."

Cuervo said that time is running out to get a flu shot, but he hasn't noticed any sign yet of widespread shortages or clinics running out of the vaccine. Even if it takes patients another week or two to get vaccinated, he said it's still worthwhile. In the meantime, he said antiviral medications that can be used as a treatment or as a preventive step can help patients with the flu.

There have been times in the past when physicians have been reluctant to prescribe antiviral medication because of concern about potential side effects, but he said those concerns have been addressed.

Trying to prevent a community-wide outbreak is a big reason why Cuervo is concerned about getting people vaccinated. He said that anyone who has the flu should stay home from work or school for at least 24 hours after their fever subsides. People who don't get sick from influenza will still shed the virus and spread it around for five days after getting vaccinated.

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