Influenza is Still Very Dangerous: Get Your Flu Shots Now

By Dr. Richard Kelley

As fall begins, so does flu season. I urge everyone in our 'ohana to be aware of the dangers and take steps to protect themselves and their families from the flu. I particularly recommend the flu shot – I got mine last week.

Influenza viruses are always mutating (evolving into new strains), so scientists have to work hard to develop a vaccine that will match the viruses considered most likely to cause the flu each year.

Two years ago, the A/H1N1 strain of influenza, also known as swine flu, caused the first flu pandemic (global outbreak) in more than 40 years. As a result, people needed two flu shots in 2009, one for the regular "seasonal" flu and a second one against the particularly dangerous A/H1N1.

While it is not certain, it is likely that 2009 A/H1N1 viruses will continue to spread along with this year's seasonal viruses. The Federal Drug Administration, in cooperation with the World Health Organization, has recommended that the 2011-2012 vaccine protect against an influenza A/H3N2 virus, an influenza B virus and the H1N1 virus.

The 2011-2012 vaccine is ready now, and during our annual Wellness Fair this last week it was offered to members of our 'ohana who work in Waikīkī. If you missed the Health Fair, be sure to see Dr. Chuck Kelley's article entitled “Flu Shots” for information on where you can get your shot.

Flu shots are especially important to people who work in Travel & Tourism. Travelers can carry the flu virus thousands of miles in only a few hours, rapidly turning a local outbreak into a global event. Travel industry workers who greet guests from all over the world are thus at greater risk of catching and spreading the flu.

I urge everyone to get their flu shots as soon as possible. Don't delay. This is serious business. “Just do it.”

Let's look at some key facts about the flu:

- A slang name for influenza, flu is one of the oldest and most common diseases known.
- It is a viral illness that can produce many symptoms, including fever, cough, chills and muscle aches.
- Some people may also experience nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.
- Bronchitis and pneumonia, both potentially very serious, can easily develop as secondary infections.

Although flu symptoms are similar to those of the common cold, the two diseases are caused by different “bugs.” Flu is much more serious. According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the “seasonal” flu – the kind that goes around every year, especially during the cooler months – is responsible, on average, for the death of about 36,000 Americans each year.

Believe it or not, in the United States, the death toll from the flu is typically higher than from traffic accidents. (There were fewer than 33,000 U.S. traffic fatalities in 2010.)

Of course, the number of flu deaths varies from year to year, depending on the strains of the flu virus circulating. For example, in 2003 – 2004, when the virulent H3N2 strain was circulating, the CDC attributed 49,614 U.S. deaths to the flu.

Each winter, the seasonal flu virus re-emerges and spreads, usually as a newly-mutated or evolved strain. Some years, the new strain is comparatively mild, and relatively few people get sick. In other years, it is highly virulent, spreading rapidly and killing many, particularly young children and senior citizens. There is a wealth of information on seasonal flu available at www.cdc.gov/flu.

Seasonal flu shots offer excellent, although not complete, resistance to the disease. They not only protect us from the current year's flu, there is evidence that they also strengthen our immunity over the years.