As fall begins, we move again into flu season. As I do every year, 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 flu shots – I got mine this week.

Influenza viruses are always changing, so scientists have to work hard to develop a vaccine that will match the viruses most likely to cause the flu each year.

Last year, 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 during the 2010-2011 flu season.

Accordingly, the vaccine recommended for the 2010-2011 season includes protection against A/H1N1 (pandemic) influenza and two seasonal flu viruses – influenza A/H3N2 and influenza B.

The 2010-2011 vaccine is ready now, and during our annual Health Fairs this past week, it was offered to members of our ‘ohana who work in Waikiki. If you missed the Health Fair, be sure to see Dr. Chuck Kelley’s article on page 12 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 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 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, the flu kills more Americans every year than traffic accidents. (There were fewer than 34,000 U.S. traffic fatalities in 2009.)

  • 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. 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.
FLU SHOTS – Frequently Asked Questions

By Dr. Chuck Kelley

Why should I get the flu shot?
The flu shot will help protect you against catching the flu, which at the very least, would be a huge inconvenience and unpleasant experience. In the worst case, the flu can be deadly.

And don’t forget, you want to protect your family and loved ones. If you catch even a mild case of the flu, you will be highly contagious before you realize you’re sick. This means you could spread the flu to your children, spouse, parents, friends, and others.

If I got my flu vaccine late last year, do I need another shot this year?
Yes. Why? Because the flu virus is continually mutating and evolving into new strains. So each year, flu vaccine is formulated differently in order to be effective against the new strains of the disease. In short, last year’s vaccination may not be effective against this year’s virus. That’s why we all need a new shot each year.

Can the vaccine give me the flu?
No, absolutely, positively not. There is no live virus in the vaccine.

Who should get vaccinated?
Anyone can benefit from getting the flu vaccine because it reduces the chances of developing the flu and its complications. We encourage all employees to get vaccinated. However, people who are at higher risk of developing flu-associated complications are especially encouraged to get their flu shot.

If you belong to one of the groups below, it is particularly important to talk to a health professional about getting the vaccine.

- Senior citizens, 65 or older
- Children, age 6 months to 2 years
- People living in nursing homes or long-term-care facilities
- Those with chronic heart or lung conditions, including asthma
- Those with other chronic conditions, such as diabetes or kidney disease
- Those with compromised immune systems (caused by autoimmune diseases, certain medications, or HIV infection)
- People with other conditions, such as seizure disorder or muscle disorders
- Pregnant women
- Women who will be pregnant during the influenza season

Who should NOT get vaccinated?
The flu shot can be harmful to a small minority of people, including those who are severely allergic to chicken eggs, those who have developed serious allergic responses to the flu shot in the past, people who developed Guillain-Barré Syndrome within six weeks of getting a flu shot, and children under 6 months of age.

Where can I get the shot if I was unable to make it to the Health Fair?
For those of you who are able to come to Waikiki, our Human Resources department has made arrangements for you to receive your vaccine at Doctors On Call. There is no appointment needed, and it’s free. Bring your photo ID and Outrigger ID.

Alternatively, HMSA members and covered dependents 18 and older can go to an HMSA-sponsored flu shot clinic where the shot is free, in most cases, for those covered by HMSA or Medicare Part B. It will be necessary to show your HMSA or Medicare card and a driver’s license or photo ID. Times and locations of HMSA flu clinics are available at http://tinyurl.com/369owwd.

For the neighbor islands, the Human Resources department is currently making arrangements with some of the clinics and pharmacies for flu shots to be administered on property. There will be no charge to employees. Details will be sent to your property managers shortly.

You always have the option of receiving the vaccine from your regular health care provider. For both Kaiser and HMSA members, you may sometimes (not always) be charged an office visit co-pay. In addition, HMSA members may get a flu shot at many pharmacies, but again, there may be an insurance co-pay or administrative fee for which you will be responsible.

The Hawaii State Department of Health maintains a long list of providers on all islands who can administer the vaccine. Some locations are free; others require payment of an administrative fee. The list can be viewed at http://www.flu.hawaii.gov/general-info.html (click on the Vaccine Locator button in the Seasonal Flu section)

If you are working at one of our properties outside the United States, please contact your Human Resources department for information.

How else can I protect myself from the flu?
Besides getting the flu shot, you can minimize your chances of catching the disease by practicing good hygiene. For example:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. Wash with soap for at least 15-20 seconds before rinsing, and rub your hands vigorously. (If you’ve grabbed a doorknob or stairway hand railing, you’ve probably picked up millions of germs and viruses. Be sure to wash before you handle any food, dishes, or utensils!)
- Cough or sneeze into your sleeve or the inside of your elbow. Germs are spread easily when we touch things with our hands. So try not to sneeze directly into your hands.
- Stay home from school or work if at all possible when you are sick. Let’s not spread the germs around!
- Avoid coming in close contact with sick people. Stay at least three feet (1 meter) away if at all possible.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.