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PRESS RELEASE

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SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN INFLUENZA ACTIVITY

(SANTA BARBARA, Calif.) -- The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department reports significant increase in influenza activity over the past 2 weeks, including 5 outbreaks in residential healthcare facilities across the county. In addition, it appears the predominant strain this year is H3N2 which tends to cause more severe illness, more hospitalizations, and more deaths.

Everyone aged 6 months and older is urged to get the influenza vaccine. The vaccine covers 4 different strains of the flu and is engineered to target the most likely circulating strains for each flu season. That means even if someone received the flu vaccine last year, they need a new one this year. This is particularly important for groups at highest risk of severe illness: adults over age 65, children under age 5, pregnant women, and those with underlying health conditions such as lung or heart disease.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an official Health Advisory on December 27th alerting healthcare providers that influenza A (H3N2) is the predominant strain so far this season. Testing in Santa Barbara County shows this is true for the outbreaks we are currently experiencing. Past flu seasons where H3N2 predominated were associated with more deaths in those over age 65 and young children, compared with other age groups.

Influenza vaccine effectiveness has generally been lower in H3N2 strains than other strains due to mutations in the virus. However, the flu vaccine still provides critical protection and is the first line of defense against influenza

This season the use of anti-viral medications to treat the flu is more important than usual for groups at higher risk of complications. These medications, such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu), are prescribed by a healthcare provider and are most effective in treating influenza and reducing complications when taken during the first 2 days of illness.

If you think you might have influenza, Public Health recommends the following:

1. Stay home- Influenza virus is highly contagious and spreads easily. Avoid contact with others, stay hydrated, and rest.

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2. Seek treatment early- If you are in a group at higher risk for complications from the flu (adults over age 65, young children, pregnant women, those with underlying health conditions) call your healthcare provider to see if anti-viral medications are needed. Because these medications are most effective when given early, do not delay in seeking treatment. Use your primary healthcare provider and outpatient clinics as the first option for treatment of moderate symptoms, so emergency rooms can treat those who truly require emergency care.

In addition to the flu vaccine, practicing good hand hygiene, avoiding contact with those who are ill, and avoiding touching your face, nose, and mouth are good protective measures against getting the flu.

For more information, see www.cdc.gov/flu.