

Flu season began Oct. 1 and officials urge people to vaccinate themselves and their children.

Last year's flu season took a large toll, hospitalizing nearly 600,000 people according to Dan Jernigan, director of the Influenza Division in the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control, at a Sept. 28 press conference. Patsy Stinchfield, director of Pediatric Infectious Disease Services, added that 105 children died during last year's season.

Renee Tigertail, clinic site supervisor for the Tribe, helps oversee flu vaccinations on the Seminole reservations. She explained that while the flu has similar symptoms to the common cold, it can be a lot more dangerous, especially for children and older adults. Without vaccinations, the flu can easily cause severe illnesses, including bronchitis and pneumonia, and can even lead to death.

Despite these risks, the number of Tribal members getting vaccinations has decreased over the years, she said. Tigertail believes part of this is misinformation about what happens after receiving the flu shot.

"I think they're still experiencing some of the symptoms [after they get the shot]," she explained. "When you inject something foreign into your body, your body's going to react to it. It's just a normal process."

According to the CDC, the flu vaccine contains inactivated strains of the virus. Because they are inactive, the shot itself cannot cause the flu; however, there are minor side effects that many people mistake for flu symptoms. These include soreness, redness or swelling at the vaccination site, headache, fever, nausea and muscle aches.

While shot symptoms are uncomfortable, they are not contagious. The flu is a contagious respiratory illness that includes some or all of the following symptoms: fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, fatigue, vomiting and/or diarrhea. Symptoms last one to two weeks if infected.

"The benefits of getting the flu shot are better than being exposed and going through that," Tigertail said. "Getting the flu is far worse than getting the shot."

Tigertail said that the CDC recommends everyone over six months of age gets the flu vaccine as early as possible, as the season does not end until March. In previous years, patients could opt for a nasal spray vaccination, but because it did not prove as effective as the shot, it is longer available. The flu shot is generally provided a single time for free, but younger children receiving it for the first time are provided two smaller doses because their immune systems are not as developed. Older people may receive larger doses. Additionally, those who did not receive vaccines and get infected can still get the flu shot, as the season is long and flu strains can change quickly.

Tigertail hopes that more Tribal members will get vaccinated this year. For the 2016-17 flu season, only 41.8 percent of American Indian/Alaska Natives got the flu shot; those identifying as Asian had the highest percentage of vaccination at 52.8 percent. This low percentage resulted in the Tribe returning dozens of unused vaccinations to the CDC.

During the Sept. 28 CDC press event, Stinchfield shared that vaccination reduces the chance of flu-related death by 51 percent in children who have underlying chronic conditions and 65 percent in healthy children.

"It is the right thing to do to vaccinate our children," she said.

Tigertail said getting vaccinated is the surest way of avoiding illness. To protect infants under six months old, it is best to keep them away from contagious or unvaccinated individuals. For those infected, she said the best way to prevent spreading it further is avoiding coughing and/or sneezing on hands or other people and keeping hands washed.

Vaccines are available at reservation health clinics, as well as some grocery stores, pharmacies and physician's offices.

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