

Darnall gearing up for flu shot season

By Patricia Deal, CRDAMC Public Affairs

FORT HOOD, Texas—Flu season is just around the corner, and in support of National Immunization Awareness Month in August, the immunization experts at Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center are promoting the importance of getting flu shots.

On average, between 5 percent and 20 percent of the U.S. population develops influenza each year, leading to more than 200,000 hospitalizations from related complications, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“You don’t have to be one of those who suffers. The single best way to protect yourself against the flu is to get vaccinated each year,” said Maj. Rosemary Wosky, from CRDAMC’s Army Public Health Nursing. “The flu shot is simple and easy to get, it’s completely safe, and is proven to be the best defense against the flu virus. Only a minority of our patients have legitimate medical reasons to not get vaccinated. For the rest of us, it’s like an insurance policy to protect our health.”

Everyone 6 months and older should get a flu vaccine each year, according to the CDC and World Health Organization. The flu shots are typically given out in September and continue throughout the flu season, which can last as late as May. Most of the time seasonal flu activity peaks in January, February or later.

For the military community, active-duty Soldiers are vaccinated first, then high risk patients and health care workers and then the rest of community.

“Usually every flu season, we get more than 90 percent of our Soldiers completely vaccinated and last year we managed to achieve that rate by the end of November,” Wosky said. “We make it as easy and convenient as possible for people to get a flu shot. Flu vaccines are available at our military health clinics and family members and retirees can also choose to get it off post at local civilian pharmacies. It’s reimbursable through TRICARE, and some places offer shots for free. We hold various outreach events though out the community during the season where we offer the shots, such as at the Retiree health Fair and the PX.”

Despite its proven effectiveness and convenience to get the shot, many are still apprehensive about getting their children or themselves vaccinated.

“It’s too bad that many people don’t get the shots because they have preconceived notion that the shots aren’t safe or won’t help,” Wosky said. “But I have seen many people who chose not to get their shot one year, be among the first ones in line the next year because they ended up experiencing the flu firsthand. The flu is just not something you want to go through.”

The influenza vaccine effectiveness (VE) can vary from year to year and among different age and risk groups. The CDC reports that in general, the highest VE is among young healthy adults and older children, stating that the flu vaccine can prevent 66 percent or more influenza infections in young children, with even higher estimates for older children.

The CDC, the World Health Organization and other medical officials continually monitor influenza viruses and outcomes and are responsible for determining the composition of the flu vaccine (usually three different vaccines) every year to combat the flu viruses that research indicates are most likely to cause illness during the upcoming season. The 2011-2012 vaccine will be the same as last year’s.

“Even if the vaccine is the same, this does not mean you don’t have to get the shot again this year. Immunity to influenza viruses declines over time and may be too low to provide protection after a year,” she said. “Really, getting a flu shot is just a simple thing to do that gives you a huge benefit. Everyone should get their shot this year.”

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Capt. Lakeisha Jones, from Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center's Army Public Health Nursing Department, gives a seasonal flu shot to an attendee of the Fall 2010 Retiree Health Fair sponsored by the hospital. In addition to providing flu shots at all the clinics, Darnall offers shots throughout the season to eligible beneficiaries at community outreach events such as the annual

Retiree Health Fair and at the Fort Hood Post Exchange last fall. (U.S. Army photo by Christie Vanover, III Corps Public Affairs)