

Wishing All a Safe & Healthy Holiday Season!

As we enter the month of December, many of us are looking forward to gatherings with our friends and family. This month also typically has special activities with work colleagues as well as events at school and church. The timing is right for some reminders about two important topics: influenza vaccination and food safety for the holidays.

December 4-8 is National Influenza Vaccination Week, a time when healthcare and public health professionals focus on raising awareness of the importance of getting a seasonal flu shot. We want to share the reminder that, for everyone 6 months and older, there's still time to get a flu vaccine this season!

Why is it so important to get a flu shot? Millions of people get flu every year, hundreds of thousands of people are hospitalized and thousands or tens of thousands of people die. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that flu vaccination coverage was lower last season, especially among certain higher risk groups, such as pregnant people and children. People with chronic conditions such as heart disease, asthma, or diabetes are at a greater risk for developing serious flu complications and are recommended to stay-up-to date with an annual flu shot.

When you get a flu vaccine, you reduce your risk of illness, and you reduce your risk of flu-related hospitalization if you do get sick. Flu vaccination can reduce flu illnesses, doctors' visits, and missed work or school due to flu, as well as prevent serious flu complications that can result in hospitalization and even death.

Has your child gotten their annual flu vaccine yet? Every year flu puts thousands of children in U.S. hospitals. Getting your child a flu vaccine can lessen flu's more serious symptoms – reducing the risk of serious illness and flu-related hospitalization if they do get sick. A flu shot also can help protect your baby from flu for several months after birth.

Locally, influenza activity is still low – about 1-2 % of emergency room visits are due to influenza-like illness, but this is on a gradual rise. Nationally, more people are testing positive for flu, more people are visiting their health care providers for flu-like symptoms, and hospitalizations due to the flu are increasing.

Remember that flu vaccine not only protects you, but it also can help protect those around you. The health department wants to remind all of our area residents that there's still time to protect ourselves and our loved ones from influenza this flu season by getting our annual flu vaccines.

Next, what should we keep in mind as we plan holiday meals and gatherings? Here are a few tips to keep your family and guests healthy for the holidays. All of these can be tied back to 4 things: CLEAN, SEPARATE, COOK, and CHILL:

- Wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and water before, during and after preparing food – including before and after handling raw meat, poultry, eggs and seafood – and before eating.
- Cook holiday meat to a safe temperature:
 - Beef Brisket, Pork Roast, Raw/Fresh Ham, Rack of Lamb, Fish Fillet (e.g., salmon): 145°F

- If starting with Cooked Ham: 140°F
- Turkey: 165°F
- Always use a food thermometer to make sure meat is cooked thoroughly to the recommended temperatures.
- Refrigerate or freeze leftovers in small portions within 2 hours of cooking.
- Serve foods safely this holiday – keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold:
 - Keep food out of the danger zone – germs can grow rapidly in the danger zone between 40°F and 140°F. So, after food is prepared, keep hot food hot and cold food cold.
 - Make sure your refrigerator is set at 40°F or below and the freezer at 0°F or below.
- Use separate cutting boards, plates, and knives: use one set for preparing fruits and vegetables, and another set for raw meat, chicken and other poultry, and seafood. Clean your cutting boards, plates and knives with hot soapy water (or in the dishwasher) after preparing each food item.

All of these tips help to prevent foodborne illness during the holidays and all year long. Foodborne illness (sometimes called food poisoning, foodborne disease, or foodborne infection) is common and preventable. You can get food poisoning after swallowing food that is contaminated with a variety of germs (E. coli, listeria, norovirus, campylobacter, or salmonella, to name a few) or toxic substances.

Give a gift of health this month! Protect yourself and your loved ones from influenza by getting a flu shot (it's not too late!) and from food borne illness by remembering to take steps to keep your food safe.

From all the staff at the South Heartland District Health Department, we wish you a safe and healthy holiday season!

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