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Local public health officials: It's not too late to get the flu vaccine, and this year it's more important than ever

KALAMAZOO, Mich. — With a particularly dangerous flu season in full swing, state and local healthcare experts and the I Vaccinate campaign are encouraging everyone 6 months and older to get a flu shot as soon as possible.

"It's not too late to get vaccinated and gain the protection that the flu vaccine offers," said Dr. Richard VanEnk, director of infection prevention and epidemiology at Bronson Methodist Hospital. "Getting the flu vaccine reduces your chances of getting the flu, and if you do catch the flu, it can help make your case less severe."

[Flu activity has increased sharply](#) in the United States in recent weeks, with almost all states, including Michigan, reporting widespread activity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently warned clinicians that flu activity has increased significantly in recent weeks, much of it from the H3N2 flu virus, which poses a greater threat to seniors and young children and elevates the importance of prompt antiviral treatment.

"One of the common misconceptions we hear is that the flu isn't serious, which couldn't be farther from the truth," said Dr. Eden Wells, Chief Medical Executive for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. "Each year, millions of children get sick with seasonal influenza, thousands are hospitalized and some die from the flu. Getting the flu vaccination every year is the most important thing you can do to protect yourself and loved ones around you from this potentially deadly disease."

Healthcare experts said Michigan residents should think twice regarding some recent news reports that have wrongly claimed the flu vaccine is expected to be only 10 percent effective this year in the United States. In fact, this figure is an Australian estimate of the vaccine's effectiveness against one strain of flu virus (the H3N2 virus) that circulated in Australia during its most recent flu season. In the United States last season, overall vaccine effectiveness against all circulating flu viruses was 39 percent (32 percent against the H3N2 virus). The CDC believes last season's U.S. estimates will be a better predictor of the flu vaccine benefits for this season in Michigan and other states.

[Five influenza-associated pediatric deaths in Michigan](#) were reported for the 2016-17 season. About 46.8 percent of Americans six months or older got flu shots during the 2016-17 flu season, compared to 44.2 percent in Michigan, according to the CDC. Among children ages 6 months to 17 years old, 59 percent were vaccinated nationally compared to 55.7 percent in Michigan. According to the January 19, 2018 [Michigan Flu Focus weekly report](#), there have been 376 influenza-related hospitalizations in Michigan since October 1, 2017.



VanEnk said area residents can get a flu vaccine at local county health departments, at other medical clinics, from their family doctor, and at some area pharmacies. You can find flu shot locations at many areas of Michigan here: <https://vaccinefinder.org/>.

The *I Vaccinate* campaign, designed with input from Michigan mothers, provides the facts that parents and other residents need to make informed decisions about vaccinations. Most parents today have never seen first-hand the devastating consequences that vaccine-preventable diseases have on a child, a family or community. Vaccination is one of the best ways parents can protect infants, children, and teens from 16 potentially harmful diseases. Vaccine-preventable diseases can be very serious, may require hospitalization, and can even be deadly — especially in infants and young children.

“As parents, we want to do everything we can to keep our children safe, and the amount of information about vaccines available online can be overwhelming,” said Veronica McNally of the Franny Strong Foundation, an organization founded after she lost her 3-month-old daughter to whooping cough in 2012, and partner in the *I Vaccinate* campaign. “The [I Vaccinate website](#) provides easy-to-understand, credible medical answers to common flu questions and other vaccine questions to empower parents to make the choice to protect their child – and the children around them – from vaccine-preventable diseases.”

November 2017 data from the Michigan Care Improvement Registry shows that only 55.9 percent of children ages 19 to 35 months and 37.7 percent of teens 13 to 17 years old are up-to-date on all recommended immunizations.

The *I Vaccinate* campaign has the support of many of the major organized medicine and public health groups in Michigan, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, Michigan Health & Hospital Association, Michigan State Medical Society, Michigan Osteopathic Association, Michigan Association of Health Plans, Michigan Council of Nurse Practitioners, Michigan Council of Maternal and Child Health, Michigan Association of Local Public Health, and many more.

Since the campaign launch in March 2017, the *I Vaccinate* website has been visited more than 58,000 times, averaging around 1,400 visits per week. Visit www.IVaccinate.org to learn more.

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