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Flu cases increase 200 percent, experts say



WINTER PARK, Fla. —

If it seems that the flu is worse this year, it is.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is reporting widespread flu activity in Florida, and some of the hardest-hit counties are in Central Florida.

Just last week, CentraCare's 24 Orlando locations reported almost 600 cases of the flu.

Dr. Timothy Hendrix, medical director of CentraCare, said the cases are coming about a month earlier than normal and the flu season is likely to last another month and a half.

To make matters worse, the flu shot is less effective than in years past.

"It's just not as effective as we wanted it to be," said Dr. Todd Husty, Seminole County director of emergency medicine. "It's about 35 percent, that's all. Which is kind of low."

And with the cold, dry weather and people staying inside, the flu is spreading fast.

"The flu is such a tough disease because it hits like a freight train," said Husty. "It's respiratory, fever, body aches, everything happens all at the same time. But the real deal is it knocks you out for 10-14 days."

As they do every year, doctors are reminding everyone to wash their hands, disinfect surfaces and stay home if they are not feeling well.

As usual, schools and nursing homes are some of the first places the flu strikes.

Hendrix said children under 2 and adults over 65 are most at risk.

“So, definitely, we need to be extra cautious when it comes to different infections that can come across easily,” said Lesa Scott, with Spring Hills Senior Communities. “And living in close quarters. Eating together and activities together and dining together. All of those things can increase the spread of infection.”

So far, Scott said, Spring Hills has not had to limit visiting hours or who visits their residents.

Despite the low effectiveness of the flu shot, doctors across the board still recommend getting a shot as the best defense to avoid the flu altogether or to at least lessen the symptoms.

“You might still get the flu, but it might not be as bad,” said Husty. “So everyone should get the flu shot and cross their fingers and hope they don’t get the flu.”

For those who do get the flu, getting to a doctor as soon as the symptoms hit can make a huge difference.

“The flu medicines work really well if you take them in the first two days. They still work some if you take them days after that, but not as well. But they work great in the first two days,” Husty said.

Hendrix said the big thing right now is knowing the difference between the common cold and the flu.

He said the best indicators are the high fever and achy body.

Patients who have those symptoms should visit their doctor as quickly as possible.