

WHITMAN COUNTY
Department of Public Health

CENTRAL OFFICE

310 N. MAIN STREET
COLFAX, WASHINGTON 99111
PHONE (509) 397-6280
FAX (509) 397-6239

PULLMAN BRANCH OFFICE

1205 SE PROFESSIONAL MALL BLVD STE # 203
PULLMAN, WASHINGTON 99163
PHONE (509) 332-6752
FAX (509) 334-4517

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Whitman County Flu Update

Influenza has been confirmed in Whitman County and is likely widespread. The number of cases can be difficult to estimate as influenza is not a reportable condition. However, Dr Brad Bowman, Health Officer for the Whitman County Department of Health, has treated more the 20 cases in the last week indicating a widespread outbreak. “ It appears to be a severe flu season from what I have seen at the clinic” states Dr Bowman, “most cases have been in unvaccinated people so I am still strongly encouraging people to get their flu shots”. To date, no deaths have been reported in Whitman County. The specific strain of flu will not be known until CDC testing is completed; however, the predominant strain will likely be H3N2. This strain, along with other previously identified strains, can cause significant illness. Symptoms of the flu will typically include severe body aches, fevers, coughing, sore throat and occasionally vomiting and diarrhea. It is spread by the small droplets expelled in the air from coughing, sneezing, and even talking. Washing hands and covering your mouth when coughing or sneezing is crucial to prevent others around you from getting ill.

If you think you have the flu, you should call your local health provider rather than immediately going to the office as this can help keep offices from overfilling and being a risk for spread to other patients. There are medications available to treat the flu; however, the medications are not always necessary and often only provide marginal improvement and a slightly shorter length of illness. These medications work best if taken within 48 hours of the start of symptoms. Generally, a person can spread the infection 24 hours **before** any symptoms appear and for the 5-7 days after becoming ill. Several practices can help prevent the flu, most importantly is receiving the vaccine.

Anyone over the age of 6 months should get vaccinated. The vaccine can decrease complications of the flu (such as pneumonia) that can lead to hospitalization and even death. You can still get the flu after having the vaccine, but it is usually less severe. Each year a new vaccine is made with a mixture of flu strains identified during the previous years. Some years are better than others and this year’s strain appears to be a good match. As a result, most people vaccinated are either not getting ill or are having less severe infections. This is especially important in people with asthma, chronic lung disease, a weakened immune system from medication or other illnesses (like diabetes or heart disease), elderly, young children, and pregnant women. These individuals most frequently suffer complications requiring hospitalization. Vaccines are still available locally at most health care facilities and pharmacies.

For more information regarding the flu please go to the CDC website <http://www.cdc.gov/flu>, Washington state health department <http://www.doh.wa.gov/swineflu/default.htm>, or call Fran at the Whitman County Health Department at 509-397-6280.