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Seasonal influenza cause emergency medical services and hospital surges

With ambulance service severely strained by an unprecedented number of flu-related visits to hospitals and emergency rooms, health officials in Riverside and San Bernardino counties are offering residents advice about the best ways to avoid the flu, when to call 9-1-1 and when to visit the emergency room.

The Riverside County Emergency Medical Services Agency (REMSA) and Inland Counties Emergency Medical Agency (ICEMA) are reporting a significant increase in recent emergency responses and ambulance transports, combined with increased delays at hospitals during transports. As a result, fewer ambulances are available to respond at any given time to 9-1-1 calls.

During the week of Dec. 24, 2017, calls for ambulance service Riverside County increased by more than 31 percent of the weekly average. San Bernardino County has experienced similar increases.

"The flu is definitely spiking in both Riverside and San Bernardino counties, and our residents need to protect themselves," said Dr. Cameron Kaiser, Riverside County public health officer. "If you're sick, take care of yourself and don't go to work or school. And if you're not sick and you haven't gotten a flu shot yet, you should."

Dr. Kaiser also recommends preventing the flu with frequent hand washing, and avoiding getting close to people who are sick.

“It’s important to remember that 9-1-1 is for serious or life-threatening medical and psychiatric emergencies,” said Dr. Reza Vaezazizi, medical director for the emergency medical services agencies for Riverside and San Bernardino counties. “This is always true, and especially pertinent in our current situation.”

Dr. Maxwell Ohikhuare, San Bernardino County health officer, and Dr. Kaiser urge community members to visit their primary care physicians and urgent care facilities if they are experiencing flu-like or upper respiratory symptoms. The emergency room should only be used for medical or psychiatric emergencies that are serious or life-threatening.

It’s not too late to get a flu shot. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) recommends influenza immunization for all persons 6 months and older who have not yet received influenza vaccine this season. Even if the vaccine effectiveness is limited, immunization can reduce illness, hospitalization and death due to influenza.

For flu shot locations in Riverside County, visit www.rivcoimm.org.

For flu shot locations in San Bernardino County, visit wp.sbcounty.gov/dph/programs/clinics/clinic-locations/.

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