



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Public health/medical community response to flu vaccine shortage

Local public health authorities and infectious disease experts from the Texas Medical Center held a press conference today to provide an update on the local status of the national flu vaccine shortage. The vaccine shortage, caused by the failure of the pharmaceutical company Chiron to deliver 48 million doses of adult vaccine, has caused nationwide concern about the upcoming influenza season.

Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services and the Houston Department of Health and Human Services are surveying local physicians, hospitals, day care centers, schools and nursing homes to identify excess and deficiency of flu vaccine. According to HCPHES Director Herminia Palacio, MD, MPH, "We are asking our medical community to assist us in identifying needs in our community by completing and returning this survey." Survey recipients are asked if they have excess vaccine, are they willing to sell it and if they need vaccine for their high-risk clients, are they willing to purchase it.

Local employers who have purchased vaccine for their work force are encouraged to follow the CDC guidelines to only immunize their high-risk employees. "Any corporation with more vaccine than they need for their high risk people are asked to contact either local health department and we will ensure that it is distributed to those at greatest need," said David Persse, Public Health Authority for the City of Houston.

In response to the shortage of influenza vaccine local and national public health and medical authorities recommend that only people at high risk for serious complications from influenza should receive the vaccine. Officials are asking residents and visitors to cooperate in the effort to reserve the limited vaccine supply. People in the following groups should be vaccinated:

- Children between the ages of 6 and 23 months
- Adults 65 years of age or older
- People with chronic heart and lung disorders and other chronic diseases including diabetes, kidney disease, blood disorders or weakened immune systems
- Women who will be pregnant during flu season
- People who live in nursing homes and long-term care facilities
- Children and teenagers on aspirin therapy
- Household members and out-of-home caregivers of infants under the age of 6 months
- Health care workers who provide direct care to patients.

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The vaccine shortage hits hard individuals and families who normally receive their immunizations from the Harris County Hospital District, the Houston Department of Health and Human Services or the Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services Department. All three agencies are working with the CDC, Texas Department of Health and vaccine vendors to secure vaccine for their high-risk clients.

Pediatric influenza vaccine is produced by Aventis Pasteur, Inc. and is not affected by the shortage.

While not everyone can receive a flu immunization, everyone can reduce his or her risk of infection by practicing good social hygiene. Frequent hand washing, covering the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, not sharing food or beverages and maintaining good personal space can reduce the risk of from many common viruses and bacteria.

There are four antiviral medications available through physicians and are effective in reducing symptoms if administered during the first two days after on-set.

More information on the influenza and the vaccine is available at the City Health and Human Services Department home page at www.ci.houston.tx.us/hlt/index.html, and on the Harris County Web site at www.harriscountyhealth.com

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