Stay Healthy This Flu Season

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts offers tips for staying healthy this Holiday Season

BOSTON — November 7, 2011 — The holiday season is upon us. Before planning that Thanksgiving dinner or Black Friday shopping spree, put a flu vaccination at the top of the list. Flu vaccinations are the first line of defense for staying healthy during the flu and holiday season. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), flu activity most commonly peaks in the U.S. in January or February. However, seasonal flu activity can begin as early as October, so it's important to get a flu vaccination early to stay healthy. Experts recommend that everyone six months and older receive one annually.

"More than 200,000 people are hospitalized each year from the seasonal flu," said Dr. Tom Hawkins, a medical director for BCBSMA. "Most at risk are children younger than two, adults 65 and older, pregnant women, and people with chronic diseases. With holiday get-togethers quickly approaching, getting a flu shot is an easy and effective way for families and loved ones to stay healthy this holiday season. The vaccine is safe, effective and widely available."

The flu not only affects people's health, it also impacts employers. According to the CDC, the flu costs businesses approximately $10.4 billion annually in direct costs for hospitalizations and outpatient visits for adults. While it's important to stay home when sick, vaccinations can prevent unnecessary absenteeism.

Where to Get a Flu Shot

Flu shots are covered when members visit participating providers. To find a participating provider members can visit: www.bluecrossma.com/flu, or call the number on the front of their ID card. Be sure to bring ID cards when getting vaccinated. Many providers/locations include:

- Primary care provider, certified nurse-midwife, nurse practitioner, or specialist
- Hospitals (outpatient department or hospital-based clinics)
- Limited services clinics, like a CVS MinuteClinic®
- Urgent care centers
- Public flu shot clinics at community centers, senior center or schools
- Workplace flu clinics
- Retail settings such as Walmart and Sam's Clubs

In addition to getting vaccinated, the chances of getting or spreading the flu can be reduced by practicing good hygiene and avoiding the spread of germs.

Good Hygiene Tips (View video)

- Frequently wash hands with soap and warm water, especially after touching surfaces in public places.
- When handwashing is not possible, use antiseptic hand gels that contain alcohol.
- Cover the mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Throw out the tissue in the nearest wastebasket and immediately wash hands or use sanitizer. No tissue? Sneeze into the crook of an arm instead.
- Stay at least three feet away from people coughing or sneezing.
- Immediately wash hands after contact with an ill person.
- When sick stay home and keep children home when they are sick.

Sometimes getting sick is unavoidable. The symptoms associated with seasonal flu strains include: fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Diarrhea and vomiting may also occur. Severe symptoms may last three to six days, and the cough may last for weeks. If flu symptoms develop, there are a number of steps that can be taken to get healthy.

Flu Treatment Tips (View video)

- Avoid contact with others, get rest, stay hydrated, and seek treatment early.
- Consult a doctor or call the Blue Care Line℠—BCBSMA's free hotline, **1-888-247-BLUE** (**2583**), where members can speak with a registered nurse anytime, 24-hours a day, seven days a week. High-risk groups, including pregnant women, are encouraged by the CDC to seek prompt medical attention if they have been exposed to or have developed the flu.
- Drink hot liquids to rehydrate, soothe a sore throat, and unplug a stuffy nose.
- Don't suppress coughs that bring up mucus, and don't consume dairy products for several days. These products make it hard to bring up mucus.
- Take acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen sodium. Children and teenagers should stay away from aspirin. As always, people should check with their health care providers to make sure that these treatments are appropriate.
- Get some rest!

For more information, visit www.bluecrossma.com/flu or the CDC's website at: www.cdc.gov/flu. Massachusetts residents looking for up-to-date flu information should call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, toll free, at **1-866-627-7968** or visit www.mass.gov/dph/flu.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (www.bluecrossma.com) was founded 74 years ago and is now the largest private

health plan in the state, providing coverage to nearly 3 million members. BCBSMA believes in working with physicians, hospitals, employers and the broader community to provide quality, affordable health care in Massachusetts. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association.

1. Molinari NA, Ortega-Sanchez IR, Messonnier ML, et al. The annual impact of seasonal influenza in the US: measuring disease burden and costs. Vaccine. 2007; 25(27):5086-96.

2. Not all locations may participate. To find a participating location, visitwww.bluecrossma.com/flu

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