

Tri-City to begin flu shots this week

■ Vaccine plentiful this year, and nearly everyone urged to get vaccinated

By Barbara Feder Ostrov and Jamaal Johnson

STAFF WRITERS

With brisker weather comes the inevitable fall reminder: It's time to get a flu shot.

Flu immunization clinics are starting this week at local pharmacies and grocery stores, as well as doctors' offices. Kaiser Permanente Fremont-Hayward, which vaccinated about 67,000 people last year, opens its walk-in clinics in mid-October and runs through December.

In contrast to recent flu seasons, when scarce supplies of the vaccine were carefully rationed, there is a record-setting supply of up to 132 million doses available this year.

"If you can avoid influenza, you are far better off," said Dr. Daniel Klein, chief of infectious diseases at the Kaiser Permanente Fremont-Hayward branch.

Find a flu shot

► Kaiser Permanente's flu hot line is 800-573-5811 and Web site info is at www.kp.org/flu.

► For Alameda County Public Health Department and community clinics, call the Immunization Assistance Project at 510-267-3230.

► General information about influenza is available at www.cdc.gov/flu.

Dr. Hoang N. Trinh of the Nakamura Clinic in Union City, which is part of the Washington Township Medical Group, said there is no designated walk-in date for a flu shot at the clinic. An appointment is preferable but not required.

"I wanted to make it accessible for anybody," Trinh said. People can get the shot from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The cost for persons who are not insured is \$30 at the Union City clinic, but most insurance companies cover the cost of the immunization.

People should get their vaccinations whenever it becomes available, Trinh said.

"Early vaccination would probably mean better protection," Trinh said.

The flu season typically gets under way in the Bay Area starting in December, but public health officials recommend that people get their immuni-

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zations early to allow enough time for the vaccine to become effective, typically about two weeks.

The peak of flu season is usually January and February, but the season can start in October and run through May, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Anyone can receive a flu shot, except for those younger than 6 months or who have allergic reactions to eggs.

Getting a flu shot "means you have less time off work, less time in bed, more time feeling good, and you're not giving it to anybody else, so that's a great thing," said Dr. Roger Baxter, co-director of the Kaiser Permanente Vaccine Study Center and former chief of the HMO's flu shot program in Northern California.

As in past years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends flu shots to those in the high-risk bracket, which consists of children age 6 months to 5 years, adults age 50 and older, pregnant women, nursing home residents, health care workers, people with chronic diseases such as asthma or HIV, and anyone living with or caring for children younger than 5.

This year, healthy children and adults ages 2 through 49 can use FluMist, a nasal spray vaccine, as an alternative to a flu shot. Previously, FluMist could not be used in children younger than 5.

Children younger than 9 who are receiving a flu vaccine for the first time need two doses, whether they get the nasal spray or a shot.

The CDC will begin its annual flu season surveillance next week, tracking cases around the country.

This year, anyone may get a flu shot, unlike in past years when vaccine was restricted to high-risk groups. The supply is plentiful in part because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved a new flu vaccine for adults, adding to current supplies. Previous vaccine shortages occurred because of other suppliers' manufacturing problems that made large amounts of vaccine unusable.

On average, 5 percent to 20 percent of the U.S. population is affected by the flu. More than 200,000 Americans are hospitalized and about 36,000 people die from influenza each year, according to the CDC.

In addition to flu shots, there are other common-sense ways to prevent the spread of influenza: Stay home when you are sick. Cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue (rather than your hands). Wash your hands often with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

And though it may seem obvious: Try to stay healthy by eating a balanced diet, drinking plenty of water and getting enough rest and exercise.