Be a Local Health Hero: Get Vaccinated Before Winter Hits

With winter fast approaching, Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, is calling on community members to take simple steps that can make a big difference by staying up to date with their vaccinations.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, said winter is a peak time for respiratory illnesses like Influenza (flu), COVID-19 and Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV).

"We know these viruses start circulating at higher levels towards the end of Autumn, and usually peak mid to late winter. They can spread quickly through families, workplaces and community spaces. Now is the perfect time to make sure your vaccinations are up to date to get ahead of that peak and protect not only yourself, but those who are most at risk," said Ms Reay.

The flu vaccine is recommended for everyone aged six months and over. Under the National Immunisation Program, certain groups can receive the vaccine for free. This includes young children, older adults, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and those with certain medical conditions.

"Experts have reported a higher number of flu cases earlier this year, up to 50% more compared to this time last year, indicating that the flu season has started early so it's a good time to make sure you're protected," said Ms Reay.

Getting vaccinated not only helps keep you well, but it also strengthens community-wide immunity, reducing the chances of serious illness for our most vulnerable members.

"Flu is one of the most common illnesses that can be prevented with a vaccine. We know that vaccination reduces the severity of flu-related illness, and the risk of flu-related hospitalisations and deaths. This alleviates some of the strain on emergency departments, ensuring that hospital services are available for those who need them most," she added.

Ms Reay reminded the community that the COVID-19 vaccine can be given at the same time as the flu vaccine, reducing the need for multiple visits.

For protection against COVID-19, those aged over 75 years should be vaccinated every six months. Those aged over 18 and up to 74 years should consider getting vaccinated every 12 months, however these groups are also eligible for a dose every six months. Children and adolescents aged 5 to 18 years are also eligible to receive the vaccine every 12 months. COVID-19 vaccinations are free for everyone, including those without a Medicare card.

Additionally, people aged 70 and older, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 50 and over, should consider receiving the free pneumococcal vaccine, which helps protect against a serious lung infection. This vaccine can also be administered on the same day as the flu and COVID-19 vaccines.

Pregnant women of all ages are also eligible and encouraged to receive the new RSV vaccine, which is available for free under the NSW RSV Prevention Program. The vaccine is recommended to be given between 28-36 weeks of gestation to provide women and their unborn baby protection

against the virus. It is also available at a cost for those aged 60 years and over who may be at higher risk of severe illness.

"Getting vaccinated against these common viruses and illnesses helps to protect not only yourself and your immediate friends, family and colleagues, but the community as a whole. I encourage everyone to talk to their GP, pharmacist or other healthcare provider to discuss what vaccinations might be right for you," said Ms Reay.

Vaccines are available from GPs, community health centres, Aboriginal Medical Services and some pharmacies. From this year, children aged two and over can now receive the flu vaccine at participating pharmacies. *While certain groups are eligible for a free vaccination, some providers may charge a consultation or administration fee.*

For more information and to find your nearest vaccination provider, visit **nbmphn.com.au/HealthHero**