

Free Flu Shots Benefit Those Most In Need

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<https://community.kp.org/be-inspired/story/free-flu-shots-benefit-those-most-in-need>

The number of people sick with this year's brutal flu continues to decrease across the nation, but experts warn the season is not over yet.

"Many states are still experiencing high influenza-like activity," said Calvin Yu, MD, chief integration officer, and physician lead, community benefit and public health, Southern California Permanente Medical Group. "As long as flu viruses are circulating, people of all ages should still get their flu shot if they haven't already."

To help boost the public's protection during the worst influenza season to hit the United States since 2009, Kaiser Permanente Southern California teamed up with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to expand an innovative approach to deliver free flu shots to areas of need.

Kaiser Permanente recently received more than 1,300 surplus flu vaccines from the CDPH to distribute to nearly a dozen safety net clinics throughout Southern California. The collaboration is in addition to Kaiser Permanente's partnership with the CDPH to offer free flu shots to children in financially disadvantaged schools. "Our support of, and partnership with safety net clinics is integral to expanding access to care and improving the health of low-income, medically underserved and uninsured populations," said Sandra Silva, MSL, director, community benefit, Kaiser Permanente Southern California. "This opportunity to partner with the CDPH is one of several efforts to help reduce health inequities in our region's under-resourced communities." Safety net clinic officials say the free flu vaccines will be put to good use.

"Resources for adult vaccines are very limited, especially for the uninsured," said **Maria Chandler, MD, chief medical officer and pediatrician at The Children's Clinic, Serving Children & Their Families** in Long Beach. "The donation of flu vaccines means that more resources can be shifted to purchasing other highly needed vaccines for them."

Jack Tsai, MD, interim medical director and a family medicine physician at The Children's Clinic, Serving Children & Their Families said the free flu shots will also benefit their homeless patients whose medical follow-up is often irregular. "Preventative measures like vaccinations are among the most helpful interventions that we can provide to these patients who are at higher risk for communicable diseases," said Dr. Tsai.

Challenging flu virus continues to circulate

The timing of the flu season is unpredictable. The 2017-2018 season began early, and public health officials anticipate flu viruses will circulate for at least a couple more months, perhaps not subsiding until May. This year's hard-hitting, widespread virus has claimed numerous lives across the country and left thousands more home from work and school fighting body aches, high fevers, and other flu symptoms.

With rare exception, the annual flu vaccination is recommended for everyone 6 months of age and older. Public health officials particularly encourage people at high risk for developing flu-related complications to get the shot, including:

- Children over 6 months and under age 5
- Adults 65 years and older
- Pregnant women
- People with certain chronic health conditions

"Getting a flu shot is one of the most important things we can do to stay well and protect ourselves and loved ones against the influenza virus," said Dr. Yu, who practices as an infectious diseases physician at the Kaiser Permanente West Los Angeles Medical Center. "We will work with the CDPH to potentially expand the program next year to even more people in underserved areas."

Reducing influenza in schools

Influenza is more dangerous than the common cold for children, whose immune systems are still developing. To help decrease the incidence of flu in communities and school absenteeism, Kaiser Permanente also teamed up with the CDPH, eight Southern California school districts, and local nursing programs to offer the program, "Teach Flu A Lesson."

With their guardian's permission, more than 8,500 children at 112 schools across four counties – Orange, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and San Diego – received free, on-campus flu shots last fall through the program, regardless of their insurance status. Kaiser Permanente selected the sites based on data it collected to identify below-average flu vaccination rates in those geographic areas.

"Getting vaccinated can reduce flu illnesses, doctor's visits, missed work and school days, and prevent flu-related hospitalizations and deaths in children," said Kathy Kigerl, RN, MN, and chief administrative officer, Southern California Permanente Medical Group. "Next flu season, we are looking to expand to a few additional school districts to participate in the successful program."

For the latest updates and recommendations regarding the flu, please visit the Kaiser Permanente or CDC websites.