Flu cuts a wider swath Local cases climb way up this year

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer

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It's the peak of flu season, and this week the Valley has nearly four times as many reported cases of the flu - and the sudden fevers, coughs, muscle aches, headaches and sore throats that come along with it - as it did this time last year, according to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

'Generally what we say is that flu season does not peak until the end of February or beginning of March and that's why we try to continue to tell people to get their flu shot,' said Patricia Abbott, public health nurse for Easthampton and Northampton. 'We now really need to encourage people to think about getting it if they missed it in the fall. Once it's out in the community, it really can spread.'

Abbott noted that the vaccine expires in June.

Meanwhile, the state - which DPH spokeswoman Donna Rheaume said has thousands more cases that were not reported - has about three times as many cases this year than last. Last week there were 8,947 flu cases reported in Massachusetts, compared to 2,778 cases at this time last year, according to the Massachusetts Influenza Data Summary Report.

'You can never predict what kind of flu season we're going to have,' Rheaume said. 'Last year it was a fairly mild season.'

On Tuesday, school nurse Robbin Suprenant said about 25 students visited her Amherst Regional High School office with flu-like symptoms, while Hampshire Regional High School was 'very busy' with 23 visits, said nurse Lyn Douyard.

Those numbers were unusual for this time of year - Suprenant said that usually more kids visit her office with flu-like symptoms the week before February vacation and fewer after the break, which tends to offer a chance for them to rest and break the cycles of infection.

'It didn't seem to happen this year,' said Suprenant, an Amherst school nurse for 10 years. 'Kids seemed to come back sick after February vacation.'

Sixty-eight out of 554 sick visitors at Cooley Dickinson Hospital, or 12 percent of visitors, tested positive for the flu this winter, according to Susan Gaughan, EMS coordinator at the hospital. Last week 17 cases were logged, making it the hospital's busiest flu week this winter.

And those cases, she noted, are only the reported ones: 'There could be a lot of flu out there we haven't seen,' Gaughan said.

'What's kind of interesting is the first one that was positive was in the end of December, a handful were once a week in January, and February is when most of them have happened,' Gaughan said.

Gaughan also noted that 72 percent of the flu cases reported at the hospital were afflicting people under the age of 30 and of those, 53 percent were people under 20.

'It was interesting because they all were young,' Gaughan said.

One potential reason the young are infected is they tend to be the age group that is least likely to get the flu shot, Gaughan speculates.

Karen Jarvis-Vance, director of health services for Northampton schools, said parents should know that the Center for Disease Control recently recommended that all children ages 1 to 18 be immunized for the flu. 'Part of the rationale is that children tend to be vectors - they tend to spread the illness even though they might not get very sick themselves,' she said. 'Immunizing a large amount of children can stop the spread of infection.'

Linda Riley, infection prevention coordinator at Cooley Dickinson Hospital, suggests people avoid the flu by continuing to do things known to promote good health: eat fruits and vegetables, get seven to eight hours of sleep, exercise regularly and make time to spend with friends and family,

And in the meantime, Abbott offers one more ray of hope: 'One of these days winter will be over,' she said.

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