

## **Flu shot advised for all children**

**'Long overdue': However, the state may not have enough to go around.**

VERONICA TORREJON  
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Hey kid, roll up your sleeve. Health officials want you to keep your germs to yourself this flu season.

Spurred by the notion that children are key flu spreaders, the government is recommending for the first time that virtually all children get a flu shot, not just those under 5. Statewide and locally, the move is being lauded by public health officials, epidemiologists and pediatricians.

"This is long overdue, and it should be heralded," said Dr. Jeffrey Jahre, chief of infectious diseases at St. Luke's Hospital and Health Network.

Local health departments have responded by becoming partners with school districts, scheduling additional vaccination clinics and urging parents to contact their family doctors or pediatricians to arrange a vaccine.

In the past, the flu vaccine was recommended only for children under 5, for those suffering from an illness that would leave their immune system vulnerable and for the elderly.

"It's a very backward approach if you are thinking prevention is the key to this," Jahre said.

This year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is recommending the vaccine for children from age 6 months to 18 years, expanding inoculations to 30 million more children.

Many health agencies, including the Allentown Health Bureau, have long taken the position that everyone who is able to should get a flu shot, a stance that was complicated by vaccine shortages, a problem local health officials said they don't anticipate this year.

That's not the case for the Pennsylvania Department of Health, which also approves the recommendation but doesn't have enough of the vaccine to go around this year, spokeswoman Holli Senior said.

"We ordered this year's vaccines at this time last year," she said. "The recommendation came out after."

The state Health Department was able to provide a one-year grant to the Allentown School District in conjunction with the Allentown Health Bureau and area hospitals to immunize all school-age children in the district.

The Bethlehem Bureau of Health is working with the Bethlehem Area School District and St. Luke's Hospital to bring flu vaccines to area schools, said Sue Madeja, nursing director at the bureau.

For many, getting vaccinated won't be as painful as getting a shot in the arm. The vaccine is now

available in the form of a nasal spray, which health officials say is much more popular among children.

"We are getting 1,000 doses, and we hope to use all of it," said Madeja.

The challenge will be getting parents to consent and fill out the required paperwork, she said. Parents should look for more information about vaccination opportunities in school newsletters.

Health officials realize some parents will go to their pediatrician for the vaccine.

Parents should look for pediatricians to start recommending flu shots during regularly scheduled checkups and sick visits, said Dr. Michael Consuelos, vice chairman of pediatrics at Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. He said pediatricians are already budgeting additional time to administer vaccines.

"Most pediatricians are finding ways to work this into their already busy practices," he said. "It will be a challenge."

Those who have studied the spread of the flu have long suspected children are primary spreaders.

That's bolstered by new evidence from Harvard University researchers who have matched Boston area emergency room visits for adults with flu-like symptoms and census data for 55 ZIP codes. They found the flu struck first and worse in the ZIP codes that were home to the most children.

"Theoretically, for every case you prevent in a child, you probably could prevent four other cases, based on some evidence, in the general population," Jahre said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.