



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Phoebe Urges Vaccination as Flu Cases Spike

Albany, Ga. – After several mild flu seasons, Georgia is suffering through a spike in flu cases that is nearly unprecedented this early in the season. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists 13 levels of influenza-like illness activity, from minimal to very high. Currently, Georgia is at a 10 (high) on that scale. Only Washington, DC has a higher level of flu activity right now.

“Unfortunately, Georgia is being hit harder by the flu than any other state right now. We have seen a sharp increase in confirmed and suspected cases in our part of the state, especially in the last couple of weeks, and we urge people to protect themselves by getting the flu vaccine right away,” said Dianna Grant, MD, Phoebe Putney Health System Chief Medical Officer. “Vaccination is especially important for those at high risk of severe illness from the flu, including older folks, pregnant women and people with underlying medical conditions.”

Because of a significant increase in flu patients, Phoebe today added extra resources to its primary and urgent care clinics to help handle the demand. “Even with additional personnel to assist with registering and treating patients, we anticipate longer than normal wait times. We are doing all we can to provide quality care as quickly as possible, and we appreciate everyone’s patience as we deal with this unusual early flu surge,” said Derek Heard, MD, Phoebe Physicians Medical Director of Primary Care.

2017-2018 was the last severe flu season in Georgia. Cases peaked in February that season, but activity this October is already approaching that peak level from 2018. “We hope we are simply peaking early this season, but cases typically continue to increase into late winter or early spring. If we don’t take action now to mitigate the spread, this season’s peak will be extremely severe,” Dr. Grant said.

Children and adolescents are being hit hardest. Experts with the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) say the overwhelming majority of flu cases in the state are among pediatric patients, though the highest number of hospitalizations has been among those 65 and older. According to DPH, the flu is to blame for at least one death in Georgia this month. The state has not recorded any flu deaths this early in the flu season in at least the last five years.

Last week alone, 443 patients at Phoebe primary and urgent care clinics tested positive for the flu. That's a 904% increase over the weekly number of positives from one month ago. Positive clinic tests have increased steadily each week since the first week of September when just six patients tested positive. An additional 161 patients tested positive at Phoebe's main emergency center last week.

"The number of confirmed influenza cases is concerning and indicates widespread virus transmission," Dr. Grant said. "Not every patient needs a flu test, however. If you have flu-like symptoms, we will generally treat you the same way, with or without a positive test. The key is to seek treatment early so you can be prescribed Tamiflu, an anti-viral medication that should lessen the severity and length of your symptoms," she added.

To protect yourself and prevent the spread of the flu, you should:

- Get vaccinated
- Wash your hands often
- Cover coughs and sneezes
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- Stay home if you're sick
- Avoid contact with sick people
- Optional masking in public

Emergency rooms across Georgia are also being inundated with flu patients. Typically, flu can be managed with Tamiflu and/or fever-reducing medicine without an ER visit. Parents should consider seeking emergency care for a child who is experiencing worsening fever or cough, troubled breathing, a bluish discoloration of the skin, dehydration, severe lethargy or irritability. Warning signs of illness in adults that may require emergency care include worsening fever or cough, shortness of breath, pain in the chest or abdomen, sudden dizziness, confusion and severe or persistent vomiting.

Flu shots are available at Phoebe primary care clinics as well as health department offices, many pharmacies and other physician practices throughout southwest Georgia.

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