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**H1N1 flu: know when to seek medical care**

As the flu season progresses, health officials are reminding South Dakotans that most normally healthy people who get the flu can recover at home without a visit to a doctor.

“Unless your symptoms are severe, the best thing you can do is stay home rather than go to the doctor’s office and risk spreading the virus to other individuals,” said Dr. Aris Assimacopoulos, Infectious Disease Specialist for Avera Health. “Most people can recover at home by resting and drinking plenty of fluids.”

The symptoms of H1N1 flu include fever, cough, sore throat, body aches, runny nose, headache, fatigue, chills and sometimes diarrhea and vomiting. Those whose symptoms are severe or who are at high risk for complications should seek medical care. This includes pregnant women, young children and those with underlying health conditions. Treatment with antiviral medication may be advised for these high risk groups.

“Children and adults who are ill and at high risk for complications or those with severe symptoms should call their doctor about whether they need to be seen,” said Dr. Wendell Hoffman, Patient Safety Officer for Sanford Health. “Don’t go to the emergency room unless you can’t reach your doctor and you have severe symptoms or at higher risk because of a chronic health condition.”

For children 5 and older and adults, treat fever and aches with acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Do not give aspirin to children and teenagers with the flu because it can cause Reye’s syndrome. Check with a physician before giving over-the-counter cold medications to children younger than age 4.

There are several warning signs indicating the need for medical treatment. With children who have flu symptoms, seek medical care if the child has trouble breathing, has bluish or grayish skin color, isn’t drinking enough, is difficult to wake or is extremely irritable. Ill adults who have difficulty breathing, pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen, sudden dizziness or confusion should also seek care. Warning signs for both adults and children include severe or persistent vomiting or flu symptoms that improve but then return with fever and a worse cough.

“It’s also important that those with flu-like symptoms not visit family and friends in the hospital or nursing home. Many are instituting visitor restrictions to protect these vulnerable populations and it’s critical that people follow those restrictions,” said Dr. James Keegan, Chief Medical Officer and Infectious Disease Specialist for Regional Health.

The Department of Health offers the following general advice for people with flu symptoms:

- Stay home, drink plenty of fluids and rest as much as possible. Avoid travel.
- Stay home from work or school until at least 24 hours after your fever is gone – without the use of fever-reducing medicine.
- Wash your hands frequently with warm water and soap or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue or into your elbow.
- In general, avoid contact with other people as much as possible to keep from spreading your illness.

Stay informed about H1N1 flu at the department’s web site, <http://doh.sd.gov/H1N1>. Detailed information about caring for the flu patient at home can be found at <http://doh.sd.gov/PDF/InfluenzaHomeCareGuide.pdf>.