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St. James ups flu-prevention efforts

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In the midst of flu season, St. James Mercy Hospital has announced it is taking additional steps to prevent the spread of the illness.

The hospital stated Wednesday it is enhancing efforts to vaccinate its employees and is distributing surgical face masks to workers who have not received flu shots.

"Those who have not been vaccinated and are in patient care or resident care areas are required to wear a face mask if they're in contact with or in the vicinity of patients and residents," said Kate Kreger, director of marketing and communications.

The hospital offers the flu vaccine to all of its employees. Getting vaccinated, Kreger said, is strongly encouraged, "but there are some people who cannot because of medical reasons or some other reason, so in that case, if they do have contact or are in close proximity to patients, visitors and residents, then we require them to wear a face mask."

The masks, the hospital stated in a news release, offer a physical barrier to flu transmission.

Intensifying its flu-prevention efforts, according to the hospital, is "a comprehensive endeavor to protect patients, residents, visitors and employees from exposure to the flu virus."

Kreger said, "We have certain requirements that we need to meet that are given to us by the Department of Health, so it's not only to meet the requirements, but also to protect the safety of our staff, the patients and the residents."

During last year's flu season, according to the hospital, the New York State Department of Health recorded 45,352 confirmed flu cases, 9,537 patients hospitalized and 14 pediatric deaths from influenza.

"Flu prevention is a priority at our hospital and nursing home, and our employees work every day to lessen the spread of flu virus by adhering to strict infection control practices and prevention guidelines," said John Carroll, interim medical director. "Starting this year, hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities must document the number and percentage of personnel vaccinated against the flu to state and federal authorities."

Carroll noted, "We also want to remind the public that if they or any family members have the flu or other contagious disease, to avoid visiting patients in the hospital and/or residents in the nursing home who are particularly vulnerable."

The hospital said as a standard practice, it enforces universally recognized precautions to prevent the flu. These include hand washing, the use of hand sanitizers — placed conveniently throughout the hospital and nursing home — as well as goggles and gowns.

"In addition, St. James Mercy Hospital adheres to rigorous infection control guidelines and policies every day to ensure a clean environment for patients, residents, staff and visitors," the hospital stated. "These practices are especially important during flu season. Antiseptic wipes are located in patient/resident rooms, work stations, hallways and other treatment areas and are easily accessible to hospital and nursing home employees responsible for sanitizing medical equipment and surface areas."

While St. James doesn't administer flu vaccines to the public, Kreger said anyone looking to get one can do so at any number of retail locations.

"There are a lot of retail facilities that offer them: The drugstores, Wegmans, Walmart, their own primary care provider, but if they want to go in and get a vaccination, I think most of the retail locations here (in Hornell) offer them," Kreger said.

The peak of flu season, Kreger said, is in January and February.

"Experts say that your vaccination is strongest for about three months, so if you get vaccinated in the very late fall or early winter, that should carry you

through the worst of the flu season," Kreger said.

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