

## **Flu, influenza strike local community**

Written by Elizabeth Barrett  
Thursday, 23 January 2014 15:38 -

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### **Local hospitalizations, clinic visits increase for various reasons**

Hospitalizations at Gothenburg Memorial Hospital and patient visits to local medical clinics have been up the past couple of weeks.

GMH's chief nursing officer Carolyn Evenson said they've seen a lot of pneumonia, influenza and a "garden variety" of related illness such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Dr. Garret Shaw, a new family practice doctor at the Gothenburg Clinic, pointed out the difference between influenza and flu.

Influenza, Shaw said, is a highly contagious respiratory disease that causes cough, fever and body aches.

The flu, which is also known as gastroenteritis, brings nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

Because gastroenteritis can be treated at home, unless patients become severely dehydrated or nauseous as can happen with the very young and old, Evenson said hospital and clinic staff haven't seen as many cases as respiratory illness.

"We've been unusually busy and it may be a new normal because we have so many health providers," she said.

Evenson said the hospital and clinic have also experienced high staff absenteeism due to illness.

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She was quick to add that she doesn't see the increased cases of illnesses as an epidemic or widespread problem.

John Grabenstein, a lab tech at Gothenburg Medical Arts, described traffic into the clinic last week as "hot and heavy."

Grabenstein said patients showed symptoms of both influenza and gastroenteritis.

Folks at Stone Hearth Estates have also battled illness while Hilltop Estates Rehabilitation Center residents have pretty much avoided it so far.

"Knock on wood," said Hilltop administrator Scott Bahe.

At Stone Hearth, administrator Barb Nuxoll said a nasty strain of gastroenteritis kept residents from gathering for meals and programs for about a week to try and prevent the spread of the virus.

They started meeting with each other again last weekend, Nuxoll said.

Ironically, the theme at Stone Hearth Estates this month is the Blizzard of 1949.

Not being able to gather made them remember how important it is "to see each other," she said.

"Their isolation because of the blizzard was two to three weeks," Nuxoll said.

The number of Stone Hearth residents with influenza hasn't been bad, she said, most likely

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because they've had flu shots.

Shaw said a person with influenza is contagious for up to seven days after the onset of the illness although the virus can be detected in secretions up to 24 hours before the onset of symptoms.

"Thus an individual can transmit the virus one day before symptoms begin," he said.

Treatment of influenza consists of rest, plenty of fluids, acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) and naproxen (Aleve or Naprosyn) for fever, cough suppressants and expectorants to treat the cough, and possibly antiviral medications, Shaw said.

Antiviral medications, which are recommended for the sickest patients, are most effective when given within 48 hours of the onset of illness, he said.

"They can decrease the duration of the disease by one day if used within this early time period," Shaw said.

Influenza can be prevented by getting a vaccination every fall, he said, pointing out that the vaccination doesn't vaccinate against gastroenteritis.

Shaw said gastroenteritis is usually caused by a myriad of viruses and usually lasts about 24 hours. Treatment consists of fluids and anti-nausea medications.

"If you are experiencing symptoms of influenza, or stomach flu, get in to the doctor as soon as possible to get treatment for you and your family," he said.

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