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Introduction

In order to help communicate with the citizens of Moore County, county Health Director Robert Wittmann, MPH has partnered with Paul Kuzma, MD to prepare a series of articles meant to inform the public about Covid-19 and public health. Dr. Kuzma has practiced medicine in Moore County for over 20 years and is currently completing his Masters of Public Health degree at Johns Hopkins University. This is the fourth in a series of articles prepared by Dr. Paul Kuzma to further public understanding of Covid-19.

The Flu

Influenza, or “the flu”, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Influenza can vary in severity from mild through severe illness requiring hospitalization and can even cause the death of the infected person. Influenza infections have a seasonal pattern and get worse during colder months. The “Flu season” in the United States is generally considered to be October through April.

The best way to reduce your risk of getting sick with the flu is to get an annual “flu shot”. Influenza viruses mutate regularly, and this means that each year we are susceptible to being infected even if we had a flu vaccination last year or even had influenza. Sometimes the influenza virus undergoes a major mutation and the vaccine is less effective. When this occurs, there is often a particularly bad flu season. Scientists modify the flu vaccine each year to provide protection against several strains of the influenza virus that are most prevalent that particular year.

Influenza cases are carefully tracked and reported each year at both the state and national level. The following table includes data on both influenza deaths and Covid-19 deaths in the US and in North Carolina.

<u>Year</u>	<u>US Flu Deaths</u>	<u>US Covid-19 deaths</u>	<u>NC Flu Deaths</u>	<u>NC Covid-19 Deaths</u>
2019-2020	22,000	211,000	186	3670
2018-2019	34,000		203	
2017-2018	61,000		391	

“To Protect and Promote Health through Prevention and Control of Disease and Injury.”
<http://www.moorecountync.gov/health/>

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Unfortunately, even though the influenza vaccine has a long track record of safety and efficacy, many people choose not to get vaccinated each year. In 2018-19 only about 45% of American adults received the immunization. North Carolina was better than average, with 52% of our citizens getting the shot. Hopefully this year more people will choose to get vaccinated.

Four good reasons to get the Flu shot this year.

1. Influenza is a contagious respiratory infection that can cause illness and death. It can be particularly severe in people who have other underlying health conditions. Flu shots can reduce both your risk of getting infected and the severity of the illness if you do get infected.
2. This year we are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid -19 is an infectious respiratory illness caused by a virus that is unrelated to the flu but can cause severe respiratory illness and death. It is possible to be infected with both Covid-19 and influenza. Trying to fight off two separate respiratory viruses at the same time will be more difficult and may lead to more severe illness, prolonged sickness and worse outcomes.
3. Since we are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, if you develop a respiratory illness this winter, you will be assumed to have Covid-19 until it is proven that you do not. This means that you won't be able to simply walk into your doctor's office or an urgent care center as you have in past years. You will be tested for Covid-19 and will need to remain isolated or quarantined until your Covid test is completed. If a large number of people become sick with the flu, increased testing for both the flu and Covid will be required and may delay results.
4. If you develop a respiratory illness and are symptomatic, even if it is the flu and not Covid-19, you may be asked to remain home from work or school until you fully recover. Any person with a symptomatic respiratory illness is unlikely to be allowed to work or attend school, since having a negative Covid-19 test yesterday does not necessarily mean that you don't have Covid-19 today.

If each of us do our part to reduce our risk of the flu and Covid-19, hopefully the 2020-2021 flu season will be mild compared to recent years. This was seen in the Southern hemisphere this year. Since they have winter during our summer months, they are just emerging from their flu season. It appears that their flu season was relatively mild this year. The precautions we undertake to reduce the spread of Covid-19 will also reduce the spread of influenza and other contagious respiratory illnesses.

Until we get a good vaccine for Covid-19, the best way to protect your health, as well as the health of your families and your community remains the same.

- Get a flu shot.
- If you are sick, stay home.
- Wear a mask if you are in public
- Separate as much as possible. If you can keep 6 feet of separation, that is best.
- Wash your hands and use hand sanitizer.