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NEWS

Children get vaccinations



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For the second year in a row, nurses who work in East Baton Rouge Parish public schools are giving free vaccinations to prevent children from contracting seasonal flu.

The blitz started Monday and will continue through the Thanksgiving holidays.

Then, nurses plan to start over again, vaccinating children for the H1N1 virus, or swine flu.

“We’re concentrating on the seasonal flu first because of its higher rate of morbidity,” said Sue Catchings, executive director of the nonprofit group Health Care Centers in Schools.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates 36,000 people in the United States die from the seasonal flu each year.

The vaccinations, primarily using nasal mist, began Monday at Banks and Winbourne elementary schools.

Catchings and supporters of the flu vaccination push held a news conference at Winbourne to publicize the effort.

The goal is to vaccinate 40 percent of the students in the school system, or about 17,000 children.

Last year, Catchings’ nurses managed to vaccinate only about 8,000 children.

“We learned a lot from last year,” Catching said.

This year, school nurses and nursing students in local colleges are starting a month earlier.

That will allow them to visit just two or three schools a day, rather than four or five each day as was the case last year, Catching said.

Also, the schools are scheduling visits earlier, publicizing the vaccinations earlier and more aggressively, she said.

The 11 public schools in Baton Rouge with school-based health centers will be administering vaccines throughout the blitz.

So far no children appear to be suffering yet from the seasonal flu, Catchings said.

As of Friday, the parish school system had 417 students who reported contracting H1N1.

The 40 percent goal is based on research by Baylor University in Texas, which found if at least 40 percent of children in a community get flu vaccinations, the rates of flu contraction go down and school attendance improves.

It's known as "herd immunity" and is contrary to the traditional vaccinate-adults-first practice, Catchings said.

Adults also benefit too from this approach. If children are immunized, adults are less likely to contract flu, said Dr. Stewart Gordon, chief of pediatrics at LSU Earl K. Long Medical Center.

While most children will receive the vaccination in mist form, an estimated 3,000 will need to receive traditional shots.

The shots are for children with asthma, some metabolic diseases and those with family members suffering from problems with their immune systems, Gordon said.

The Our Lady of the Lake Foundation paid for much of the cost of last year's vaccinations.

This year, the federal government is paying for both the seasonal and the H1N1 vaccinations as part of the stimulus package, Catchings said.

Prevention is not only the right thing to do, it saves money, said John Paul Funes, chief executive officer and president of the foundation.

He said normally about 30,000 children come to the Our Lady of The Lake Regional Medical Center emergency room each year.

"If we can control this, that means fewer kids will clog up our emergency rooms and more children who truly need help can get it," Funes said.

Gordon said most children will need to be vaccinated for the seasonal flu only once; children who are 9 years old and younger are urged to get two shots.