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Mary Washington Healthcare and Rappahannock Area Health District Urge Community to Prepare for Respiratory Illnesses

Fredericksburg, VA – November 15, 2022 – Mary Washington Healthcare (MWHC) and Rappahannock Area Health District (RAHD) are seeing signs that the flu season may be worse than in recent years. More people are seeking care in emergency rooms and urgent care centers for influenza-like illness. RAHD has seen multiple outbreaks of confirmed and suspected influenza in schools and other settings across the district. Both MWHC and RAHD are urging residents to follow precautions to slow the spread of influenza and other respiratory illnesses.

"We have already seen large flu outbreaks locally, which is unusual this early in November," said Olugbenga Obasanjo, MD, Health Director at RAHD. "The actions we were taking to protect against COVID-19 for the past two years also protected against the flu. Because of the low spread of flu for the last two years, people do not have the immunity built up to provide protection against the influenza virus, which is part of the reason we are already seeing increased flu activity this year."

Stephen Mandell, MD, Vice President, Senior Medical Director, Mary Washington Hospital says, "As we have emerged from the pandemic, many of the practices of masking and social distancing particularly when one is symptomatic have ceased. Delays in receiving the flu vaccine, given the focus on COVID vaccination, has likely increased the community's vulnerability to these respiratory viruses. Thus, getting vaccinated and exercising practical precautions if respiratory symptoms develop, such as masking and avoiding crowds, are wise steps for everyone's benefit."

MWHC and RAHD encourage everyone six months of age and older to get a flu vaccine. The seasonal flu vaccine is designed to protect against the influenza viruses that research indicates will be most common this year. While healthcare providers and public health professionals have been encouraging flu shots early, receiving the vaccine now is still beneficial and should protect one through the flu season.

"If you have not already received your flu shot this year, now is the best time to get it," said Dr. Obasanjo.

Practicing healthy habits such as social distancing, masking in high-risk areas, and frequently washing your hands, reduce the chance of infection of the flu and other respiratory illnesses.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is also circulating in the community along with significantly high rates of Influenza A. RSV is common and usually causes mild to moderate symptoms in most people, but it can be very dangerous for infants or those who are immunocompromised. In the last 30 days, patient visits to MWHC Urgent Care centers have increased, with an average of 72 patients per day, 70 percent of which are respiratory related.

Vaccinations for the flu and COVID-19 are widely available in pharmacies, primary care providers, and health departments throughout Virginia. To learn more and to get help finding vaccines, contact the Call Center at 877-VAX-IN-VA (877-829-4682, TTY users call 7-1-1). Assistance is available in English, Spanish, and more than 100 other languages. Visit www.vaccines.gov to find a vaccine near you.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports it is safe to get both a COVID-19 vaccine and a flu vaccine at the same time. The updated COVID-19 bivalent boosters provide targeted protection against the original virus strain and the circulating Omicron sub variants (BA.4 and BA.5).

Contact your healthcare provider or your local health department for additional information on how to prevent flu, COVID-19 and RSV.

ABOUT MARY WASHINGTON HEALTHCARE:
Mary Washington Healthcare is a fully integrated, regional medical system that provides inpatient and outpatient care through over 50 facilities including Mary Washington Hospital, a 471-bed regional medical center, and Stafford Hospital, a 100-bed community hospital. Mary Washington Healthcare is a non-profit health system with a longstanding commitment to provide care regardless of ability to pay. For more information about our services and facilities, visit mwhc.com.

ABOUT RAPPAHANNOCK AREA HEALTH DISTRICT:
Rappahannock Area Health District is one of 35 health districts under the Virginia Department of Health. RAHD provides medical, environmental, and public health services to residents of the City of Fredericksburg and Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania, and Stafford counties, serving

a population of more than 375,000. Its mission is to protect the community and the environment through the prevention of disease, lasting community partnerships, access to quality services, and the promotion of healthy behaviors.