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December 3, 2009

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PNEUMOCOCCAL VACCINATION RECOMMENDED TO HELP PREVENT SECONDARY INFECTIONS

Pneumococcal infection identified as complication in some severe and fatal H1N1 flu cases

(RICHMOND, Va.)— Secondary bacterial pneumonia was a frequent cause of illness and death during each of the influenza pandemics of the 20th century. Pneumococcal infections have also been identified as a complication in some severe and fatal cases of the current H1N1 influenza pandemic.

But unlike flu pandemics of the past, two pneumococcal vaccines are now available that may help to prevent these infections.

“In addition to the seasonal and H1N1 flu vaccines, the pneumococcal vaccination is a good idea for those with health conditions that put them at higher risk for complications and illness,” said State Health Commissioner Karen Remley, M.D., MBA.

In a typical, non-pandemic year, most serious pneumococcal infections occur in people age 65 and older. But in the 2009 flu pandemic, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports an increase in pneumococcal infections in younger persons.

Most of those with high-risk conditions for pneumococcal disease are also at high risk for severe complications from influenza. The CDC recommends pneumococcal vaccination for all people 65 years of age and older and for persons 2 through 64 years of age with certain high-risk conditions.

Risk factors include cardiovascular or lung disease, sickle cell disease, diabetes, alcoholism, chronic liver disease, cerebrospinal fluid leak, a cochlear implant, a weakened immune system due to illnesses such as HIV infection or leukemia, immunosuppressive therapy, a removed or dysfunctional spleen, residing in nursing homes or long-term care facilities, cigarette smoking and asthma.

Streptococcus pneumoniae (pneumococcus) remains a leading cause of vaccine-preventable illness and death in the United States. Unfortunately, only one-fourth of adults with high-risk conditions have received the pneumococcal vaccine. For adults, usually only one dose of pneumococcal vaccine is necessary in one’s lifetime, while multiple vaccinations may be required for children. A pneumococcal vaccination may be given at the same time as influenza vaccine, and is available at many private physician offices and pharmacies.

For more information about the H1N1 flu virus, visit www.H1N1GET1.com. Information for the public is also available from the Virginia Department of Health Inquiry Center toll free weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at **1-877-ASK-VDH3** (1-877-275-8343).