Influenza season is just getting underway in Minnesota, so it's not too late to get vaccinated against what can be a serious disease, say state health officials. Nearly everyone should get vaccinated and there are more options for doing so than ever before.

An ideal time to get vaccinated is during Minnesota's annual *Ban the Bug* campaign, which runs Dec. 2-8. It is a collaborative effort to provide Minnesotans with opportunities to get their annual influenza vaccination. Campaign partners include the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), the Minnesota Coalition for Adult Immunization (MCAI), local public health agencies and other health care providers. The campaign coincides with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Influenza Vaccination Week.

Local public health agencies, nonprofit groups and health care organizations in many Minnesota communities will sponsor influenza vaccination clinics during *Ban the Bug* week as well as throughout the month of December and beyond. Flu vaccinations are now given at a wide variety of places, including traditional doctor's offices, local health department clinics, and community settings as well as in retail pharmacy and worksite locations.

Besides the traditional flu shot, there is a nasal spray available for healthy people between ages 2 and 49. There is also a new product that uses a very small needle to inject the vaccine into the skin layers only.

"With so many options, it's hard to imagine why anyone who could get vaccinated wouldn't," said Kris Ehresmann, director of MDH's Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Control division.

Influenza vaccination is now recommended for everyone six months and older unless they cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons. It is especially important that those at high risk for serious complications from influenza be vaccinated. These include pregnant women, seniors, young children and those with chronic medical conditions.

Children under six months of age cannot receive influenza vaccine, so household contacts and caretakers should be vaccinated to protect the very young.

"By getting vaccinated for influenza now, you can greatly reduce your chances of getting influenza – or spreading it to someone else -- during the busy holiday season," Ehresmann noted.

Influenza is a disease that can have serious consequences. Even during a typical influenza season such as 2011-2012, more than 500 Minnesotans were hospitalized with influenza.

"The best way to reduce your risk of serious illness is with vaccination," Ehresmann said. "While the vaccine doesn't offer perfect protection, if you don't get vaccinated, you have zero protection," she said.

It's important to get influenza vaccine every year, health officials said. The vaccine often changes from year to year because the strains of virus circulating around the world can change every year and the level of protection wanes over the course of a year. This year there are two

new strains plus the H1N1 strain in the vaccine.

Minnesota recorded its first official case of influenza early this season and the virus is currently circulating at low or "sporadic" levels in the state. Flu season can peak anytime between January and April, so getting an influenza vaccination now can provide months of protection, said Ehresmann.

"Our coalition works year round to make sure Minnesotans have every opportunity to protect themselves, their families and their community against influenza and to stay healthy all season long," added Kristin Nichol, MD, Associate Chief of Staff for Research at the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Health Care System and chair of MCAI.

To locate the flu clinic nearest you, go to the MDH Influenza website at www.mdhflu.com and choose
Find a Flu Shot Clinic
.

The cost of vaccinations will vary at each site. There is no cost to people with Medicare Part B and some other insurance plans, provided they bring their Medicare or other insurance cards with them. Those seeking shots are asked to wear short sleeves, perhaps under a sweater if it's cold, to make getting the shot easier and more comfortable.

Flu shots also may be given at other locations and times not listed on the MDH website. Check with your physician's office or regular walk-in clinic about getting vaccinated against the flu.

During flu season, besides getting vaccinated, there are other steps people can take to avoid spreading or catching influenza:
• Do your best to stay healthy. Get plenty of rest, physical activity and healthy eating.

• Stay home from school or work if you have a respiratory infection. Avoid exposing yourself to others who are sick with flu-like illness.

• Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue whenever you cough or sneeze, then throw the tissue away. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve.

• Clean surfaces you touch frequently, such as doorknobs, water aucets, refrigerator handles and telephones.

• Wash your hands often with soap and water or with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available.

The symptoms of influenza, which tend to come on suddenly, can include a sore throat, coughing, fever, headache, muscle aches and fatigue. People who become severely ill with influenza-like symptoms should see a physician. Influenza is caused by a virus and antibiotics are not effective against it.