

Get vaccinated to protect you from flu and its complications

Written by By MEG SIBAL, M.D.

ACCORDING to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between five and 20 percent of the U.S. population develops influenza each year leading to more than 200,000 hospitalizations for related complications and about 36,000 deaths, says the November 2010 issue of the UCLA Division of Geriatrics' Healthy / Years.

Vaccines approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the 2010-2011 influenza season in the United States provide protection against three strains of influenza, including the "swine flu"...an A/California/7/2009 (H1N1-like virus, an A/Perth/16/2009 (H3N2)-like virus, and a B/Brisbane/60/2008-like virus.

Since one season can vary widely from the next, it's still too soon to tell how severe this year's flu season will be, as seen in last year's flu season when an unanticipated virus...the H1N1 (swine flu) virus...emerged and rapidly spread worldwide, says the October 2010 issue of the Mayo Clinic Women's Healthsource. First reported in the U.S. and Mexico in April 2009, the H1N1 (swine flu) virus caused a significant number of illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths that summer and fall.

"The flu shot is usually given in the fall (September through mid-November), but can be received as late as February or March," says Michelle Islami, M.D., a geriatrician at UCLA Health System. Influenza tends to occur in the winter months, as individuals spend more time in close contact with one another, adds Dr. Islami.

According to a new recommendation from the CDC, everyone six months and older should get the seasonal flu vaccine, especially individuals who are at high risk of having serious flu-related complications or those who live with or care for individuals at high risk of these complications, including:

- Older adults (age 50 and up)
- Young children
- Pregnant women
- Individuals with certain chronic conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, lung disease or kidney disease) or weakened immune systems

Flu complications, which can lead to hospitalization and even death, include dehydration, pneumonia and a worsening of chronic medical conditions. During a regular flu season, about 90 percent of these deaths occur in adults age 65 and older, adds the Mayo Clinic health letter.

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Pneumonia caused by the influenza virus cannot be treated by a specific drug...rest and treatment of the symptoms that accompany the disease are the only ways to overcome the infection. While many of those who contract pneumonia do not have to be hospitalized, those who are older than 65 are likely to be hospitalized as are individuals who have other health problems that are associated with aging.

It's best to get the flu vaccine as soon as it's available in your community, since it can take two or more weeks for your body to develop antibodies to the flu virus after vaccination. This way, you'll be protected by the time the flu season peaks which, in the Northern hemisphere, is usually December through March, not to mention being prepared for the start of the flu season, which can begin as early as September or October.

Certain individuals should not be vaccinated against the seasonal flu, including:

- Children less than 6 months old
- Individuals with severe chicken egg allergies (the flu vaccine is made in chicken eggs)
- Those who have had a severe reaction to vaccination in the past
- Individuals who developed Guillain-Barre` syndrome (GBS)...an extremely rare disorder in which a person's immune system damages nerves, causing muscle weakness and sometimes paralysis

The flu vaccine is available as:

- Standard flu shots
- Nasal spray called FluMist — This is approved only for healthy individuals ages 2 to 49
- Fluzone High-Dose — Licensed only for individuals age 65 and older, it's identical to the standard flu shot, but contains four times the amount of each viral strain antigen, increasing the likelihood of an effective immune response in older adults

Research has shown that a flu shot is between 70 to 90 percent effective in warding off illness in healthy individuals under age 65 (it is hoped that the high-dose vaccine will enhance protection in those 65 and older), when there is a good match between the seasonal flu vaccine and circulating strains of the flu virus.

Despite the common myth that the flu vaccine can actually cause the flu, Dr. Eslami advises that you cannot get the flu from the flu shot because, while the live vaccine does contain viruses, those in the flu shot have only inactivated pieces of the virus and, therefore, can't cause infection. In the nasal spray, the viruses have been weakened so that they can't cause illness in healthy children or adults.

Nevertheless, the seasonal flu vaccine does not provide protection against flu viruses that are

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already in your body before you get vaccinated, and may not be effective against newer strains of the flu that emerge during a flu season, warns the health letter.

Aside from the seasonal flu vaccine the following good health habits can provide additional protection from the flu:

- Keep your distance from those who are sick — In addition, avoid crowds during peak flu season, since flu viruses travel through the air in droplets when someone with the infection coughs, sneezes or talks. You can inhale the droplets directly or pick up the germs from common objects such as tabletops or doorknobs.
- Frequently wash your hands and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth — It's best to wash with soap and warm water for 15 to 20 seconds, or else, use an alcohol-based hand gel containing at least 60 percent alcohol
- Eat right and get enough sleep — A poor diet and lack of sleep can lower your immunity and make you more prone to infections

In any case, if you develop flu symptoms...such as a runny nose, cough, fever, chills, body aches and fatigue...stay, home, get rest and drink plenty of fluids. If you're at risk of complications because of your age or health, contact your doctor, who may decide to prescribe an antiviral medication, which could shorten your illness and help prevent more serious problems, concludes the health letter.