

Dear Colleagues,

Fall is in the air today, which means soon we'll have our first frost, our heating systems will groan to a start, and - yes - the influenza season will be upon us. Flu incidence usually peaks in February or March, but in some years it has done so as early as December, and cases often start appearing even in October. So here I am, starting to exhort you to get that wonderful flu shot.

Permit me to review some pertinent information:

1. Are the shots effective? Yes. It gets a little complicated, but in years when the shot matches the circulating flu its effectiveness is about 70%. In children, it's even more effective, and in the ill or elderly it's less so. But even if it prevents only 50% to 60% of cases, it's still VERY worth-while.

2. A few years ago I got the flu shot, and then I got the worst case of flu in my life. I'm never getting that shot again." How often I've heard this! What are the facts?
 - a. You cannot get the flu from the flu shot. Period. The virus in the shot is stone cold dead.
 - b. If you came down with the flu within a couple of weeks of the shot, you were going to get that flu anyhow. The shot's protection does not kick in until 10 to 14 days after the shot.
 - c. That "flu" may have been another respiratory illness, not the actual flu. In any given year, these other bugs can be very prevalent.
 - d. As mentioned above, the shot is not 100% effective - so, yes, you may have gotten the flu. But the shot had nothing to do with it.
 - e. Sometimes the flu shot does not match the circulating strains of flu. In recent years the match has been very good, but one never knows in advance how things will work out. But even in bad match years, the shots have some effectiveness. This year's vaccine provides protection against two strains of influenza that were not covered in last year's shot.

3. "OK. You convinced me - sort of. But there must be side effects of the shots. I don't like to take anything I don't have to." In fact, side effects of the vaccine are not a big problem. Some people can get a sore arm, but that's really about it. In fact, in large studies of people who got a real flu shot or a dummy shot, the only difference in side effects was arm soreness.

4. "Eggs make me sick. Can I still get the shot?" In general, yes. If you have a severe egg allergy, such that you have to check food ingredient lists to make sure there's not even a little egg present, then you should check with your doctor whether or not the flu shot is acceptable. It is true that there is a very tiny amount of egg in the shots, since the virus for the vaccine is grown in eggs. But reactions on that basis are very rare.
5. "What about that new pig flu virus?" So far this year there have been about 300 U.S. cases of illness due to an unusual flu virus called H3N2v. These have been associated with pig contact, usually at petting zoos or at agricultural fairs; have occurred mainly in children; have been mild in general; and have tended not to spread person-to-person. One death has been reported so far. The vaccine does not protect against this strain. The take-home lesson: Avoid pig contact, and make sure that hands are washed thoroughly with soap and water if such contact has occurred. And, as I mentioned in a previous note, make sure that toys, pacifiers, etc do not contact barnyard animals.
6. "Why all this fuss? The flu is not such a big deal." Well, it is a big deal. Deaths due to influenza range from 3,000 to 49,000 a year in U.S. This huge variation depends on many factors - but in any event flu is really a big deal. This is not the common cold. You can read more about flu deaths in the U.S. at this link: http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/us_flu-related_deaths.htm And every year, there are patients in our ICU with severe flu. At MGH the respiratory ICU is filled every winter with flu patients on ventilators struggling to stay alive. Many of these are young previously healthy people. Often a pregnant woman is among them.
7. Finally, if you protect yourself against the flu, you're also protecting your contacts. And those contacts can include very vulnerable folks - young infants, the elderly, the chronically ill - among your family members and, of course, your patients.

I am so very proud of all of you. Last year NWH was number one in the state in hospital worker flu immunization. But I always knew we were number one in caring for our patients and in trying to do the right thing. We now have the opportunity once again to show our mettle. Yes, I am so very proud of all of you.

Best wishes for a wonderful, healthy, flu-free fall and winter.

Mark the Immunizer