

Say “Boo” to the Flu - Get Your Flu Shot!

By Dr. Charles Dougherty, Pediatrician, Esse Health

It was a strange flu season last year. There was the “seasonal flu” and the “H1N1 swine flu” with separate vaccines for each one. Because the H1N1 outbreak showed up after the production of the seasonal flu vaccine had begun and because the outbreak came on quickly and unexpectedly, the early production of the swine flu vaccine was not fast enough to keep up with the demand. Worries that H1N1 would be “the big one” were fueled by several deaths at the beginning of the outbreak. Fortunately, the severity of the illness seemed to lessen as the pandemic spread, a happy but unexpected twist.

It is simpler this year. There is just one flu vaccine. This year’s vaccine includes the H1N1 swine flu as one of its components, boosting the protection given last year to those who got the swine flu shot last year. Also included in this year’s vaccine are a couple of other strains of influenza that the experts are guessing to be possible causes of the influenza this season. There are two alternate forms of the flu vaccine (a shot and a nasal spray), but they both offer protection for the exact same strains.

The official recommendation of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is that EVERYONE OVER AGE 6 MONTHS SHOULD GET THE FLU VACCINE. The physicians at Esse Health endorse this approach and will be making sure that they and the Esse Health office staff are also vaccinated in order to protect our patients as well as themselves.

Think of the flu vaccine as protection for the person receiving it, but also as indirect protection for those people who might be exposed to you if you were to get the flu.

Below are a few of the most frequently asked questions and answers about the flu:

1. What is the flu? The influenza, or flu for short, is a respiratory virus that usually hits in the winter months. There are multiple strains of it and each year different strains show up as the viruses change

and modify. The illness usually presents as a very achy cold and cough with fever. Usual symptoms include a sore throat, headache and major lack of energy. Often there is an upset stomach at the beginning. Fever and feeling bad typically lasts for several days. There is a lingering cough at the end, which may persist for weeks as it gradually goes away. Complications of ear infection and pneumonia can add to the seriousness of the illness in some cases.

2. Who should have the highest priority for receiving the flu vaccine? The groups most susceptible to influenza complications are designated as highest priority. These include: young children; all family members, household contacts, and out-of-home care providers of children younger than 5 years; children with asthma, diabetes, neurologic diseases; health care personnel; and pregnant women.

3. When the flu is going around, what can I do to lesson my chances of getting it? Mostly it is common sense stuff: cover your nose and mouth when you cough (elbow preferred over hands). Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap is not



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available, use an alcohol-based hand rub. Avoid close contact with sick people. If you are sick with fever, stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone before heading out in public.

4. What about antiviral medicines for the flu? There are two antiviral medicines (Tamiflu and Relenza) that are used sometimes with the flu, depending on how sensitive the particular strain is to the medicine. These medicines have the ability to shorten the course of the illness by a day or two and make the illness milder, but only if they are given very early in the illness. They are expensive medicines, but certainly have a place in the treatment, especially in patients who may be at high risk for complications of the influenza.

5. How many flu shots are recommended this year? Usually just one. However, for certain children age 6 months to 8 years old there may be two doses a month apart, depending on how many shots they received last year.

6. Will there be enough vaccine to go around this year? By all reports, yes. Manufacturers project 170 million doses for the United States, which should be enough to cover all the demand.

7. Is the flu vaccine safe? YES! Flu vaccines have been repeatedly tested over many years and are extremely safe.

8. Can the flu vaccine give you the flu? No. The flu shot is a dead, killed virus incapable of causing disease. The nasal spray is a live virus, but it has been modified so that it cannot give you the flu.

9. Who can use the nasal spray vaccine? Flumist (a live virus vaccine with effectiveness as good as or better than the shot) is available for healthy people age 2 to 49 years old who do not have asthma or certain other excluding conditions.

Resources:

essehealth.com

flu.gov

cdc.gov