

As flu season approaches, so does time for yearly vaccination

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By Eileen Beal

Each year, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, over 110,000 people are hospitalized with flu. Almost 40,000 of them die, and 90% of those who do so are over the age of 65.

“People don’t realize how serious flu is...especially for the elderly. For them it can be lethal,” explained Mary Jo Slattery, a geriatric nurse practitioner at MetroHealth Medical Center.

“People think they have the flu when they have a bad cold,” she added., “If they got the flu, they’d know the difference.”

Flu, she explained, is a respiratory illness that strikes fast and unexpectedly. It causes a dry cough and sore throat, a runny nose, fever and chills, body aches, muscle pain, and headaches. It can incapacitate a healthy person for several days and hospitalize someone who isn’t for weeks. Summing up a bad bout of flu in two words, Slattery said: “It’s horrible.”

Who’s at risk for flu?

Because your immune system becomes less robust and able to fight off germs, bacteria and viruses as you age, everyone over the age of 65 is a prime target for flu, especially if they are a long-term smoker or have long-standing heart disease and/or respiratory problems, such as asthma or emphysema. So are people under 65 who have chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, anemia or hemophilia, hepatitis, or kidney disease. So are people who are hospitalized during flu season—October thru March. And, not surprisingly, so are those who are caring for those who have flu, whether they are doing so at home or in a long-term care facility.

While flu is a major cause of illness and death for older adults, it’s got a sure-fire cure—a yearly vaccination.

“Each year the vaccine is different,” said Slattery.

That’s not because the flu virus mutates, it’s because there are many flu-causing viruses circulating in the US and other parts of the world, and the CDC, which is responsible for keeping tabs on all of them, makes up a new flu vaccine each year based on which viruses are expected to cause flu that year.

The vaccine works for everyone, but because it is made using eggs, people with an allergy to eggs must take special precautions because they can have a potentially life-threatening reaction to the vaccine.

The best time to get a flu shot is in October or November. “The flu season usually begins in late December or early January so getting the shot then will give your body plenty of time to build immunity,” said Slattery.

“You don’t want to get vaccinated too early,” she added, “because the immunity starts to wane after about five months.”

Surprisingly, given the track record flu vaccination has—“It can absolutely save your life,” said Slattery—and the fact that it’s covered by company health plans and Medicare (Part B) and/or are offered for free through county and city health departments and for a minimal fee (\$10-\$15) at local senior centers, walk-in clinics, and pharmacies, over a third of those who should be getting annual flu shots don’t.

That’s due to two things, says Slattery. “People aren’t aware they need them or they think that you get the flu from the vaccine,” she said.

You can’t get flu from the vaccine. “The virus mix in the injection is dead,” explained Slattery.

Some people do have a reaction to the vaccination, however. In very rare instances it’s a reaction to the egg protein used in the vaccine. Usually, it’s a low-grade fever, cough, minor muscle aches, and/or swelling and redness at the site of the injection.

When that happens, said Slattery, “Everything usually goes away in 24-48 hours.”

Resources

Your health care provider or local senior center

Cleveland Department of Public Health 216-664-3609

Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Services 216-420-6750

Cuyahoga County Board of Health 216-201-2010

First Call for Help 216-436-2000

Immunization Information Hotline 800-2232-2422

Flu Facts for Everyone www.cdc.gov/flu

Immunization Information Homepage www.vaccines.ashastd.org

Influenza: Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/flu/fluvirus.htm

Medicare-Fight Flu and Pneumonia www.medicare.gov/health/FluDetails.asp