



Share the Wellness Tip

November 1, 2013

Who needs the Flu Shot?

A flu vaccine is your best protection against the flu. And since flu is contagious, getting vaccinated can help keep others in your family and community from getting sick, too.

What Causes the Flu?

The illness we call "the flu" can be caused by any one of the many different types of influenza viruses. The three main types are A, B and C. Each year's vaccine protects against type A and B viruses. Type C viruses are usually mild and don't cause seasonal epidemics.

There are different strains of type A and B viruses. Each year's flu vaccine is developed to protect against the strains of the virus that scientists predict will be most common in the upcoming flu season. The 2013-2014 seasonal flu vaccine protects against three types of viruses: influenza B, influenza A (H3N2) and influenza A (H1N1). It is possible to be exposed to an influenza virus that is different from the viruses the vaccine is designed to protect against. In that unusual case, you could still get the flu. The H1N1 virus, called swine flu during the initial outbreak in 2009, is an example of an unexpected strain of flu virus that the vaccine did not initially protect against.

"When H1N1 hit in 2009, it was a new and unpredicted strain of a virus," said Dr. Cary Schneider, Blue Cross and Blue Shield medical director and pandemic committee member. "It hit earlier than the usual flu season and spread quickly, since people did not have immunity to the virus. H1N1 is less of a threat now because health care professionals are prepared for it."

Who Should Get Vaccinated?

Vaccines aren't just for children and the elderly. Even if you're a young, healthy adult, you still need to protect yourself against the flu. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends an annual flu vaccine for all people ages six months and older.

You know getting vaccinated protects you. But did you know it also protects the community and your loved ones? Being vaccinated lowers the chance that you will spread the virus, which could be especially dangerous for children and older people. Most people who die from the flu are either 65 and older or young children.

Which Vaccine Should You Get?

There are two types of flu vaccines. One type is an inactivated vaccine that contains a killed virus. This type is available as a shot that's usually injected into the muscle in the arm.

The second type of flu vaccine is a live, weakened virus. This type is available in a nasal spray. Your doctor can help you decide which type of vaccine is best for you.

Can the Flu Vaccine Make Me Sick?

Getting a flu vaccination does not make you get the flu. There are some possible side effects, but they're usually mild. The shot may cause redness, soreness and swelling at the injection site. It also may cause headache or muscle aches, mild fever, nausea or fainting, mainly in adolescents. An over-the-counter pain reliever may ease the minor side effects.

The nasal spray may cause runny nose or congestion, sore throat or cough, fatigue or weakness, headache, or chills. In children, it may cause wheezing, abdominal pain, or occasional vomiting or diarrhea.

On rare occasions, vaccines cause more severe side effects, such as serious or life-threatening allergic reactions.

When Should I Get the Vaccine?

You should get a flu shot as soon as it's available. Flu season can begin as early as October. Check with your doctor to find out how and where to get vaccinated.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 2013; Flu.gov

