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Flu Vaccines and Vaccine Safety

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Influenza vaccination is the most effective method for preventing influenza and influenza-related complications”. Both seasonal flu vaccine and H1N1 flu vaccine should be available in Massachusetts during the fall and winter of 2009. This document has been developed to address questions concerning the safety of the vaccines used to protect against seasonal and H1N1 flu.

Are seasonal and H1N1 vaccines safe?

Yes, seasonal and H1N1 vaccines are among the safest medications that are administered to people, including prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications.

Like any vaccine or medication, seasonal and H1N1 vaccines should be administered by trained health professionals who will determine which vaccine is best suited to each patient. A patient with an allergy to eggs, for example, should avoid vaccines derived from eggs in order to avoid an allergic reaction to the vaccine.

How well does the flu vaccine work?

According to the CDC, how well the flu vaccine works depends on how close the match is between the flu vaccine and the types of flu viruses that are circulating. Scientists predict what types of flu viruses are most likely to spread and cause illness each year to produce a vaccine that will protect against them. In years when the vaccine strains and the virus strains are well-matched, the vaccine can reduce the chances of getting the flu by 70%-90% in healthy adults. The vaccine may be somewhat less effective in elderly persons and very young children, but vaccination can still prevent serious complications from the flu. In healthy adults less than 65 years of age, the flu vaccine can also prevent lost work days, and keep you from having to see the doctor or using unnecessary antibiotics.

Are there some people who should not get a flu shot?

Yes. For example, people who are sick with a fever at the time the shot is available and people with certain allergies. People who have had Guillain-Barré syndrome within six weeks of a previous dose of flu vaccine should talk with their doctor before getting the flu shot.

Can pregnant women get flu vaccine during their pregnancy?

Yes, it is safe to give seasonal and H1N1 vaccines to pregnant women anytime during pregnancy.

Do people die from getting a flu shot?

No, there have been no deaths associated with getting a flu shot. In contrast, thousands of people die every year from flu illness in the United States.

Are vaccines tested?

Yes, vaccines are tested in people before they are approved for wider use. Vaccines are only approved for wider use if the testing (called a “clinical trial”) shows that the vaccines are safe to use. Once vaccines are approved and are being used throughout the country, any problem following vaccination should be reported by healthcare providers to a national reporting system called VAERS (Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System). The reporting of “adverse events” allows the safety of the vaccine to be continuously monitored. Anyone can report to VAERS, including concerned parents, by going to the VAERS web site or by calling 1-800-822-7967.

So there’s testing and monitoring?

Yes, the CDC, in conjunction with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), local boards of health, and healthcare providers, provide careful and on-going monitoring of any potential problems following vaccination.

What about thimerosal that is used as a preservative?

There continues to be no scientific evidence that thimerosal causes harm. The amount of mercury that is contained in the preservative is within the range that is considered safe. It is so low that it should not be a concern. The type of flu vaccine that is sprayed into your nose (nasal spray) does not contain thimerosal or other preservatives.

Aren’t there side effects of getting vaccinated?

There can be side effects, yes. Most of the time side effects are mild and easy to manage. Anytime someone gets a shot there will be some people who will have a feeling of warmth or soreness at the site of the injection. Some people may have mild fever. Most people do not experience any side effects, and those that do experience them have mild side effects. Serious side effects are extremely rare.

Can I get the flu from the flu shot?

No, flu vaccines (seasonal or H1N1) do not and cannot cause flu.

I have heard that the H1N1 vaccine has been rushed through the testing process, and therefore might not be safe.

H1N1 vaccine is being made exactly the same way seasonal flu vaccine is made every year, and with the same testing process required before distribution. It is as safe as seasonal influenza vaccine.

What about swine flu in the past, and the people who got sick from the vaccine?

During the swine flu outbreak in 1976, some healthy people who received the vaccine (possibly one in 100,000 to 300,000) developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) afterwards. GBS causes weakness and paralysis of limited duration. The CDC has studied the risk of GBS following flu vaccination extensively since that time. Many of the studies have not shown any association whatsoever between flu vaccine and GBS. One study suggested that one in one million people receiving vaccine may be at risk of GBS following the vaccination.

What is the bottom line concerning influenza vaccine safety?

Flu is a serious respiratory disease that causes thousands of deaths every year in this country. It is preventable. Keeping safe from the flu greatly outweighs the very small risk of side effects from both seasonal and H1N1 vaccines.