



A Different Flu Season

By Lynn Harrelson, R.Ph., FASCP
Senior Pharmacy Solutions
Medication Therapy Management Services
www.SeniorPharmacySolutions.com

This year's flu season has already proven to be very different. The entire country has been talking flu since the beginning of the year. The really big difference this year is that we are talking about two very different influenzas. The CDC guidelines for the annual flu remains the same and they have established guidelines for the swine H1N1 vaccine that are likely to change over the season.

Our population over 65 has been encouraged to get their annual flu shot earlier this year. The biggest fear of many healthcare workers is that seniors will discount the importance of the annual influenza vaccine. With all the talk about the H1N1 flu, it may be easy to think that the routine annual flu vaccine can wait. The annual vaccine is even more important this year for everyone. Getting the annual vaccine will protect patients from the annual flu that can weaken their system. Getting the annual flu may cause seniors to be more susceptible to H1N1 flu.

While any flu vaccine may not always provide total protection, it often protects us from coming down with those debilitating flu symptoms---profound nausea, vomiting and diarrhea which are often accompanied by generalized aches and pains. The annual flu vaccine is generally offered, mid-fall to early winter before the start of flu season. It is important to get your vaccine early since it can take up to two weeks to build up your immunity following your flu shot. If you are reading this and haven't taken the time to get the annual flu vaccine, now is the time.

Getting your annual flu shot is important since the "flu" can sicken millions of people each year and cause serious complications. Especially at risk are those with diabetes, asthma, or other heart, lung or kidney diseases. Seniors not living in nursing home or those without chronic conditions greatly benefit from the annual flu vaccine. The annual flu vaccine can reduce chances of hospitalization from flu or pneumonia by 30-70%. It is extremely important we try to limit

hospitalizations this year as there may be a profound need of hospital beds because of the H1N1 flu.

In some cases, the flu shot may still result in you getting the flu, but it will usually be a much less severe form of the illness. The vaccine contains viruses that are killed, these “killed viruses” cannot give you the flu. The vaccine instead causes your body to develop antibodies that are your body’s defenses against the flu. Antibodies help you stay well but they need time to develop. A flu shot can also result in some muscle aches where you received the injection. This discomfort usually lasts one or two days. Call your healthcare provider if the discomfort lasts longer.

Seniors should discuss flu vaccine with their healthcare providers. If you develop a fever, however slight, you need to delay your flu shot. You will also need to be evaluated if you have had an allergic reaction to an earlier flu vaccine. You should also tell your healthcare providers if you are allergic to eggs or if you have developed Guillain-Barre syndrome with 6 weeks of receiving the flu vaccine in a previous year.

The next best thing that you can do to help protect yourself from the flu and viruses is to practice good hygiene.

Wash your hands thoroughly and often with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol. This is especially important when you are in the public and handling things. Grocery cart handles, doorknobs, and elevator buttons---these are breeding grounds for all types of bugs. Computer keyboards and telephones are also “flu bug carriers”.

Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth whenever possible. Any bug you may have picked up more easily enters your systems after you have touched these areas.

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw those tissues away; leaving them around only helps spread your germs to others. Many pharmacies are also now carrying facemasks for those with colds and bouts of sneezing so they can protect others by wearing them.

If there is a flu outbreak, try to limit your exposure. Stay home, out of areas where lots of people gather. If the elevator is full, give yourself a break and wait for the next one. In confined areas, you are more likely to “breathe in” the bugs from others. During the flu outbreak, some healthcare providers cancel routine appointments. Avoid crowds when the flu is most prevalent in your area.

Should you get the flu, your best bet for treating flu symptoms remains the tried and true. Take plenty of fluids and get plenty of rest. For your aches and pains, take acetaminophen (Tylenol[®]) or ibuprofen (Advil[®], Motrin[®]).

The best medicine is and always has been is that ounce of prevention. Take care of yourself; keep the flu “bugs” away. Keep your defenses up; eat well, stay active in healthy environments and get your annual flu vaccine early. The flu vaccines are often available at a number of community sites. Look for flu vaccine clinics in your community, senior or church newsletters. Get a head start for the healthier winter---get your flu vaccine early.

