

Steven L. Berk, M.D. – Flu shot

Why is a flu shot more important than ever this year?

00:06

Well, it's more important this year than ever, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. So that pandemic is continuing. Individuals are continuing to get sick to fill up hospitals, ICU beds to be on ventilators. And influenza can do that too. So we know that every year 30 or 40,000, people in the United States might die from influenza, and many more are hospitalized and miss work, children miss school. So we are awaiting a COVID vaccine. And we don't have that yet. But we do have a safe influenza vaccine. And so we can decrease the severity of disease and the number of illnesses with the influenza vaccine. And that's going to help us cope with COVID-19 at the same time we cope with influenza.

What is a twin-demic?

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What we mean by a twin-demic is that we now have two pandemics. A pandemic is an infectious disease that occurs around the world. So COVID-19 is a pandemic, and influenza every year occurred as a pandemic. So now we have to at the same time influenza and COVID-19.

What are common myths about the flu shot?

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There are a lot of myths about the flu shot, which is a very safe vaccine. It's effective, not 100% effective, but it is a very safe vaccine. The first thing people need to know is that it is an inactivated vaccine. So they grow up the virus but the virus is killed and activated. So no one can actually get influenza from the influenza vaccine. Now they can get soreness at the site of the injection, and about 10 or 15% of patients will complain about soreness. And much more unlikely as some actual fever and chills may be for a day. But that's uncommon. Very rarely, there have been serious problems. But very, very, very rare. There was a flu vaccine in 1976, where one out of 100,000 people had a neurologic problem called Guillain-Barre syndrome associated with that. We haven't seen that since. So there's no serious side effects associated with the influenza vaccine. Now about eggs, a lot of people think they're allergic to eggs, there's actually very few people that actually have a severe allergic reaction to eggs. But people are worried about that from the influenza vaccine because the vaccine has always been grown on an egg base. For those who really do have an egg allergy, they can now get a vaccine that based on growth, a virus that was not on eggs. But again, it's very rare to have a true egg severe egg allergy. Another problem that people have worried about is mercury in the vaccines. And in the past, there has been a very small amount of ethyl mercury in the vaccines. But even that has gone down to almost zero. And there's absolutely no side effects. And that can occur from the tiny, tiny amount of preservative that is in the vaccine.

What are the different ways to get the vaccine?

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This there's several different kinds of vaccines now. Almost all of them are based on getting an injection of a small amount of fluid. There is a nasal spray vaccine as well. It's a live virus, attenuated meaning weakened, so that it can't really cause influenza. And that's appropriate for very healthy people. Maybe people who don't want to get stuck by a needle, but for the most part, the vaccine everyone is going to get is an inactivated vaccine, and it's gonna be by injection.

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How effective is the vaccine?

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People have asked is the vaccine totally effective? Because they have heard that in fact, the vaccine is not totally effective. And that's true, depending on the season depending on the patient population. The effectiveness of the vaccine is anywhere between 40 and 70%. However, those who get the vaccine and still get influenza usually have a much less severe disease. Also, if only half the population gets the vaccine, and even if it's only 70% effective, that will still save thousands of lives and prevent many more hospitalizations.

What else is important to know about the flu shot?

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Recognizing the importance of getting an influenza vaccine, there are more places now than ever to get the vaccine. And you can go online and find lots of different places where influenza vaccine is available. And wherever you go, it will be safe, people will be wearing masks, everyone will be six feet apart. So we don't want anyone to worry about not getting the vaccine because of circulating COVID-19. The other really important thing is we want everybody or almost everybody to get the influenza vaccine. CDC recommends everybody over the age of six, get the influenza vaccine. If we follow that recommendation, there'll be so many less days of work lost, and so many less students missing school. But really the most important thing of all is we want to give the vaccine to those who if they get influenza are likely to die from it. So that's really going to be our major target. Those who would get seriously ill or die from influenza if they got it. So we want to vaccinate everyone over the age of 65. They are high risk anybody with chronic lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, certain inflammatory and immunosuppressive disease. This is the message we want about getting an influenza vaccine really has to go out to those individuals and that's really how we're going to save lives.