

FLU SHOTS

Do You Need One?



Every year 10,000 to 20,000 Americans die from the complications of flu.

by S. J. Ackerman

Flu season lurks just weeks away, threatening each of us with a bout of miserable, even dangerous illness. The best time to protect ourselves with influenza vaccinations is coming up in November.

Should you or other members of your family be immunized? To answer, first consider influenza itself.

Just What Is the Flu?

Influenza—"the flu"—is a viral infection of the upper respiratory system. Sudden high fever with sore throat, headache, and a hacking cough, followed by days of lethargy, distinguishes influenza virus infection from ordinary respiratory diseases such as the common cold. If the influenza virus invades the lungs, or if secondary bacterial pneumonia develops, the results can be even more severe. (So-called "stomach flu," a term folks use to dignify unexplained gastric upsets, has nothing to do with influenza.)

Flu can be fatal, particularly to those most vulnerable to its complications: infants, the elderly (even some without obvious underlying health problems), and people plagued with chronic heart and lung ailments.

At the end of World War I in 1918, "Spanish Flu" infected one-fifth of the people in the world, killing more than 20 million, almost twice as many as perished in the war. A primitive vaccine proved useless as that outbreak and its milder 1919 variant attacked 28 percent of Americans and carried off 500,000, one-half of 1 percent of the U.S. population. No outbreak since has approached such dire proportions, yet influenza can still be deadly. Every year 10,000 to 20,000 Americans die from its complications, with up to 40,000 mortalities in years when new influenza strains appear.

We're not likely to see a return of the viral strain that caused the 1918 epidemic because influenza changes over time. As humans develop antibodies to fight the virus, its outer surface changes to elude resistance. To anticipate such changes, scientists the world over share information every year to predict what flu strains will emerge. Their prediction must be completed months in advance of flu season to allow time for a vaccine appropriate to the dominant strains to be perfected and mass-produced.

Obviously, predicting the course of such an evasive disease is a tricky business. Yet, beyond the rule that the "B" strain and the more troublesome "A" strain tend to appear in alternate years, epidemiologists can assemble enough data to make highly educated predictions. Their recommendations about who should be immunized deserve to be heeded.

Risk Groups

U.S. government health policy concentrates on controlling the spread of influenza among those groups most likely to suffer severely from its complications, including:

- anyone with chronic pulmonary or cardiovascular disorders, including children with asthma,
- nursing-home or long-term-care residents with chronic medical conditions,
- persons aged 65 or older,
- anyone who needed regular medical follow-up or hospitalization during the previous year for chronic metabolic diseases (including diabetes mellitus), kidney function problems, immunosuppression, or certain blood abnormalities known as hemoglobinopathies, and
- children and teenagers (aged 6 months to 18 years) who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy and may therefore be at risk of developing Reye syndrome if infected with influenza. (See accompanying article, "Flu and Aspirin Don't Mix for Kids.")

Special Cases

It is especially important that people in these high-risk groups be protected against the flu. They can be infected by contact with anyone carrying the influenza virus, even if the carrier has just a few mild symptoms, or even none at all. Health-care personnel in close contact with high-risk patients should be immunized, as should home-care providers and household members, including children.

Recognizing that it is impossible to fully eliminate an elusive, changeable disease like influenza, the government targets the most vulnerable people. Yet, although they may be less ravaged by flu's effects, others also deserve special attention. For instance,