



Give it a Shot...

Protect your family from flu this season with the flu vaccine

While it seems like yesterday that we were at the pool finding some relief from the D.C. summer, flu season is now upon us. Though the first cases are not here yet, most doctors and hospitals have already begun administering the flu vaccine. With so much media attention to the flu vaccine, many moms can be confused about how to make the best decisions for their families.

To help sort through this topic, I have prepared a list of five of the most common questions I receive regarding the flu vaccine and how I generally respond.

Who should get the flu vaccine?

Most organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the CDC recommend that, *"Anybody who wants to reduce the likelihood of becoming sick from the flu or of spreading the flu to others"* should receive the flu vaccine, especially the following groups:

- Children from 6 months up to 5 years of age. *Note: Only children over 6 months of age can get the flu shot.*
- Any parent, caregiver, or household contact of children up to 5 years of age.
- Adults 50 years of age or older.
- People with history of wheezing, asthma, or other chronic medical conditions.
- Most women who are or will be pregnant during the flu season. *Note: Though the flu vaccine is felt to be safe for pregnant women throughout the pregnancy, some OB offices prefer to wait until the second or third trimester.*

The above groups are considered higher risk because when exposed to the flu virus these individuals are more likely to be hospitalized. Therefore, most healthcare professionals, including myself, strongly encourage the above groups to receive the flu vaccine annually.

Can the flu shot actually give you the flu?

No. It is impossible for the flu shot to give you the flu virus. Unlike what you may feel from the flu shot, the actual flu disease is caused by a living virus and can be very contagious.

So why did I get sick last year after getting the flu shot?

The goal of a flu shot (or any vaccine) is to expose your immune system to a component of the actual organism you are trying to protect yourself against. It is a relatively short lived immune system response to this component that makes you feel sick, not the actual virus. Thus, the illness that you may feel from the shot is typically much milder and shorter in duration than actually becoming sick with the flu virus.

What is Flumist?

Flumist is a relatively new type of nasal spray flu vaccine that contains the actual flu virus in an attenuated (weakened) form, and is thimerosal free. Though it does have a hypothetical low risk of transmitting the actual flu virus, some studies have shown Flumist to be more effective than the shot. Flumist was recently approved by the FDA for ages 2 - 49. However, there are more

restrictions about who may receive Flumist. Visit www.flumist.com for a complete listing of who is eligible for Flumist.

Is it safe for my child to receive a flu vaccine with thimerosal?

This is one of the areas that receives the most media attention and controversy in the press. As stated by the CDC and supported by the vast majority of most medical organizations:

There is no convincing evidence of harm caused by the small amount of thimerosal in vaccines, except for minor effects like swelling and redness at the injection site due to sensitivity to thimerosal... Based on guidelines established by the FDA, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), no child will receive excessive mercury from childhood vaccines regardless of whether or not their flu shot contains thimerosal as a preservative.

When looking at the policy statement as well as considering the risks and benefits of the flu vaccine, I support the use of the routine flu shot (containing minimal thimerosal) for my patients. Nevertheless, I respect the concerns of some parents and do maintain a small quantity of preservative free vaccine. The preservative free vaccine is usually more difficult to find and always costs more than the routine flu shot.

Wishing you and your family a flu-free flu season!

Hirsch Pediatrics is proud to announce its first *Get a Flu Shot...Give to Charity* program. Visit www.HirschPediatrics.com for details.

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