

Center for Diagnostic Sciences BULLETIN



November 2003

Issue #1

This is the first in a series of Bulletins of the Center for Diagnostic Sciences that will replace the former Bulletin of the Office of Medical Affairs. The Center for Diagnostic Sciences is located at the west end of the first floor of the USC School of Dentistry. The members at the center strive to raise awareness about the role of oral and systemic health in human well being. You may forward your comments to Ms. Latrese Lawson at llawson@usc.edu or 213-821-2336. We thank Dr. Joyce Galligan for contributing to this issue.



Achuuuuuu! Yes, it is that time of year again --- flu season. The flu (influenza) season typically occurs from October to March. Anyone can get the flu. Most people are ill with the flu for a few days, but some get much sicker and may need to be hospitalized. About 36,000 people per year in the United States die from influenza, and 114,000 per year have to be admitted to the hospital as a result of the flu.

Yet just 70 million people get the flu shot every year, roughly half the number in high-risk groups. The average cost of a flu vaccine is \$15. The new nasal spray vaccine cost \$46 a dose wholesale and doctors may charge \$10 to administer it.

How is the flu virus passed around?

The flu is spread, or transmitted when a person who has the flu coughs, sneezes, or speaks and sends the flu virus into the air, and other people inhale the virus. The virus enters the nose, throat, or lungs of a person and begins to multiply, causing symptoms of influenza.

The flu can also be spread when a person touches a surface that has flu viruses on it ----a door handle, for instance and then touches his or her nose or mouth.

Does this mean the flu is contagious?

A person can spread the flu starting one day before he/she feels sick. Adults can continue to pass the flu virus to others for another 3 to 7 days after symptoms start. Children can pass the virus for longer than 7 days. Symptoms start 1 to 4 days after the virus enters the body. Some individuals infected with the flu virus have no symptoms.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Chills
- Nasal congestion
- Muscle/body aches

It is impossible to tell for sure if a person has the flu based on symptoms alone. Doctors can perform tests to see if you have the flu if you are in the first few days of your illness.

What should I do if I get the flu?

- Rest
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Avoid using alcohol and tobacco products
- Take medications to relieve symptoms of the flu
- Consult with your medical care provider if you are not feeling better a few days after the start of your symptoms.

Influenza is caused by a virus, so antibiotics do not work to cure it. The best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each fall, before the flu season.

Who should get the inactivated (traditional) flu vaccine?

People 6 months of age and older at risk for getting a serious case of the flu or flu complications, and people in close contact with them should get the vaccine.

An annual flu shot is *recommended* for:

- People 50 years of age or older
- Residents of long term care facilities
- People who have long-term health problems with:
 - heart disease
 - kidney disease
 - lung disease
 - asthma
 - metabolic disease, such as diabetes
 - anemia, and other blood disorders
- People with weakened immune system due to:
 - HIV/AIDS
 - Long term treatment with drugs that weaken the immune system, such as steroids
 - Cancer treatment with x-rays or drugs
- People 6 months to 18 years of age on long term aspirin treatment
- Pregnant women who will be past the 3rd month of pregnancy during the flu season

- All healthcare providers (this includes dental healthcare workers) who come into close contact with people at risk of serious influenza.

What is in the traditional influenza vaccine?

Inactivated (killed) influenza vaccine has been used in the United States for many years. Influenza viruses change often. Therefore, the flu vaccine is updated every year.

Protection develops about 2 weeks after getting the vaccine and may last up to a year.

Some people who get the flu vaccine may still get the flu, but they usually get a milder case than those who did not get the vaccine.

Flu vaccine may be given at the same time as other vaccines, including the pneumococcal vaccine.



Can I get the new intranasal influenza vaccine that was recently approved by the FDA?

A live, attenuated (weakened) intranasal flu vaccine was licensed this year under the trade-name FluMist. It is sprayed into the nostrils rather than injected into a muscle.

The live, intranasal vaccine is approved for healthy children and adults from 5 through 49 years of age, including household contacts of some people at risk for influenza complications. However, because its safety has not yet been studied in other groups, FluMist **should not** be used by many people at risk for the flu or its complications. (see question relating to who should receive the traditional vaccine since it is the list for who should not receive the intranasal vaccine).

The traditional flu shot (inactivated vaccine) is preferred over the live vaccine for all healthcare providers.

Are there other restrictions to either (inactivated and attenuated) flu vaccine?

People should discuss with their doctor before getting a flu vaccine if they:

*Ever had a serious allergic reaction to **eggs** or to a **previous dose of influenza vaccine**.

*Have a history of **Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS)**

If you have a fever or are severely ill at the time the vaccine is scheduled, you should probably wait until you recover before receiving the vaccine.

When should I get the influenza vaccine?

The best time to get the flu vaccine is in October or November. The flu season usually peaks in January and typically lasts through March or April, so getting the vaccine in December, or even later, can be beneficial in most years. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that all healthcare workers should try to receive their flu vaccine in October.

The flu vaccine supply for 2003 is expected to be plentiful, so no one should have to wait to get immunized.

Are there any risks from inactivated influenza vaccine?

A vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as allergic reactions. The risk of a vaccine causing serious harm, or death, is extremely small. Serious problems from flu vaccine are very rare. The viruses in inactivated influenza vaccine have been killed, so you can not get the flu from the vaccine.

Live, intranasal influenza vaccine can cause mild symptoms. Some symptom examples are: runny nose or nasal congestion, fever, headache and muscles aches, abdominal pain or occasional vomiting, sore throat, cough, chills, and tiredness/weakness.

