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MEDIA RELEASE

Date: November 4, 2009

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It's Not Too Late to Get Vaccinated!

By Brenda Kailing, RN, BSN

With multiple schools closed across Michigan in the past two weeks as a result of absences due to flu-like illness, many local residents are asking if flu vaccination is important anymore. Their reasoning is that if so many people have already had H1N1 infection, it's too late to worry about getting the vaccine.

In fact, it's more important than ever to be vaccinated. There is no way to predict future timing, spread, or severity of this virus. We do know that influenza occurs in waves of about 6-12 week periods over the course of a year or so after a new virus appears. It also tends to affect different geographic areas with varying intensities at different times. Over the weeks and months ahead, we may see fluctuations up or down. Even if a peak seems to be occurring now, there are still plenty of people who have not yet been infected.

About 20% of children and 7% of adults in the U.S. report having a flu-like illness in October, according to a new survey from CDC, and most of those cases likely were H1N1 flu. Because symptoms of all types of flu are similar to those caused by many other viruses, specific testing must be done to identify the virus. This test is different from rapid flu tests that doctors can do in their offices. Such specific testing is not normally recommended because it doesn't change the treatment provided. This means most people won't know whether they've been infected with H1N1 or another respiratory virus. So unless you're absolutely sure you've had H1N1 infection, you should still be vaccinated, particularly if you are in one of the highest risk groups.

There is increasing CDC evidence that H1N1 flu targets the young. Between September 1 and October 10, 2009, more than half (53%) of recently hospitalized patients for H1N1 flu, and close to a quarter of those who died (23.6%), were younger than age 25. This age distribution is dramatically different from what is seen with seasonal flu, where 60% of hospitalizations are for people over age 65 and 90% of deaths occur in the elderly. As of October 27th, 114 U.S. children and teenagers have died of H1N1 flu since the strain emerged last April. In the past 3 years, pediatric deaths from seasonal flu have ranged from 46 to 88.

"But I'm healthy," you might say. "Why do I need the shot?" True, 2/3 of those who have died from H1N1 have had underlying medical conditions that weaken the heart, lungs, or immune system. But that still leaves a significant number of previously healthy people who have become ill, deteriorated suddenly, and died. And as the pandemic progresses, there will almost certainly be more deaths.

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Some parents of children who have died from flu have even asserted that if more people had been vaccinated, their child might never have contracted the infection in the first place. That could well be the major reason you should get the H1N1 flu shot. Even if getting sick doesn't worry you, by immunizing yourself you vastly lessen the chances you will spread the virus to someone else who might die from it.

Additional CDC statistics show that a surprising 46% of adults hospitalized with H1N1 flu were previously healthy and had no known chronic illness. Also notable is that 6% of adult deaths (28 of 484) were pregnant women. Pregnant women normally make up about 1% of the U.S. population. The key point is that this disease can be serious in apparently totally healthy people, causing unexpected death.

Are you concerned about vaccine safety? Don't be – flu vaccines have been given safely since 1945. H1N1 vaccine is made using the same manufacturing process, in the same factories, with the same safeguards as seasonal flu vaccine. If the H1N1 virus had been identified earlier in the season, it most likely would have been included in the seasonal vaccine.

What about harmful side effects? So far, reported side effects are just like those from seasonal vaccine – soreness, redness, and swelling in the arm where the shot was given, or a slight runny nose and headache after the nasal spray. As for causing the flu itself, this is impossible. Any viral particles in the vaccine are either “killed” (the shot) or “weakened” (the live attenuated nasal spray) so they cannot grow in your bloodstream or lungs.

Do you hate needles? There might be a nasal spray vaccine alternative for you. Do you think the vaccine might not be effective? Studies thus far show that the H1N1 vaccine is an excellent match with the virus that's circulating, meaning there is no reason to expect it will not be highly effective.

There is no doubt that vaccination is a personal choice, but it should be an informed one. If you choose vaccination, you might save yourself a lot of misery. But on a much larger scale, you could be helping to ease the burden of illness on schools and health care providers. You might even save someone else's life.

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