



What *You* need to know about the Flu Vaccine

by Jane B. Thiel APRN, WHNP-BC

You are really sick! You have a high fever, chills, congestion, cough, headache and terrible body aches... You have the flu (influenza). Millions of Americans will get the flu this year. Some high risk individuals such as the elderly, pregnant women, or those with lung and chronic medical conditions may actually die.

Many of these lives, loss of work and school time, and productivity could be prevented by the influenza vaccine. This year there are three different vaccines available: the regular flu shot for people six months of age and older, a “high dose” flu shot for those ages 65 and older, and the nasal spray vaccine for people 2 thru 49 (NOT for pregnant women). The first two vaccines are made from “dead” virus. The nasal spray is made from “live” weakened virus. It is important to understand that none of the vaccines cause you to get the flu!

Who should get the flu vaccine?

Health experts agree that everyone over the age of six months should get vaccinated. Some children between the ages of six months and eight years may need two doses of vaccine to be fully protected (check with your health care provider). The young (less than two years old) and people over 50 are at higher risk. Anyone in long term care facilities or those caregivers for high risk individuals should get the vaccine. All pregnant women should get the vaccine unless otherwise contraindicated.

Who should NOT get the vaccine?

Infants under six months. It is very important that their caregivers receive the vaccine so they don't infect the infant. For people who are sick or running a fever, they should postpone immunization until they are well. People who have severe allergy to chicken eggs and those who have had severe reactions to the vaccine should check with their health care provider before receiving the vaccine.

When do I get the vaccine?

It is best to get vaccinated as soon as the vaccine becomes available in the fall. It takes about two weeks for your body to build antibodies after the vaccine is given. Ideally people should be vaccinated by December; however, the flu season can last into May so getting the vaccine later is still beneficial. You can get flu vaccine in most doctors' offices and clinics. Many pharmacies in West Michigan administer the vaccine, as do employers, med stations, colleges, and the local health department.

What side effects from the flu vaccine can I expect?

Flu vaccines are very safe. Serious side effects and adverse events are very rare. Most common side effects from the shot are some localized tenderness, redness and some mild swelling at the injection site. Side effects from the nasal spray vaccine can include a mild runny nose, cough, or nasal congestion which is transient.

Tough questions straight answers.

Many people think that getting the disease gives greater long term immunity than the vaccine. This may be true but be prepared to pay a big price. A natural polio infection can cause permanent paralysis, mumps can cause deafness, and natural chickenpox can cause pneumonia. Rubella in pregnancy can severely injure the developing fetus. There are many more. Childhood vaccines are safe and prevent a variety of serious, potentially fatal diseases.

Vaccines do not cause autism. Researchers have not found any connection with childhood vaccines and development of autism. The original study that suggested this association has been retracted. The fact that autism is often diagnosed around the time children are getting many of their vaccines (MMR) is totally a coincidence. Childhood vaccines should be given on schedule and picking and choosing which vaccines to get is not a good idea.

Adult Vaccines: Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, seasonal influenza, Pertussis (whooping cough), Pneumococcal, HPV, Tetanus and Shingles vaccines are all available to adults. Consult your health care provider on what vaccines you need. If you plan foreign travel contact your local health department on what immunizations or preventative medications you may need for countries outside of the US. A little prevention may save a lot of heart ache.

Remember, by you getting vaccinated against the flu, you may help stop the spread of the virus to your loved ones and others in the community who are high risk.

Resources:

Kent County Health Department,
Immunizations – childhood, adolescent, and adult.
Call 616-632-7200 for an appointment.

Kent County Health Department,
International travel – located at Fuller Clinic only.
Call 616-632-7200 for a travel appointment.

Centers for Disease Control (CDC):
www.cdc.gov/vaccines

Michigan Department of Community Health (MDCH):
www.michigan.gov/immunize

Immunization Action Coalition (IAC):
www.immunize.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jane Thiel is a women's health nurse practitioner at Grand Rapids Women's Health. For 35 years, Jane has enjoyed working with women of all ages; although she is specifically sought out for her experience in menopausal issues. Outside her career, Jane enjoys travel, cross-stitch and being a grandmother.