

To wait or not to wait for flu vaccination

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Some health experts recommend seasonal flu shot later.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend the seasonal flu shot be given when it's available.

However Gothenburg Memorial Hospital's nursing administrator said other medical officials recommend that anyone wanting the seasonal flu shot wait until late October for the vaccine.

"That's because the seasonal flu vaccine can begin to wane in the spring," explained nursing director Kayleen Dudley. "That means if you get the shot later in the fall, you'll be protected in the spring."

Although CDC officials said January and February are peak months for season flu, Dudley said it sometimes climaxes in March and April.

"We want older people to be protected as long as possible," she said.

Dr. Jay Matzke of Gothenburg Family Practice agreed, noting that he tells patients to wait at least until Oct. 15 since the vaccine needs at least six to eight weeks to reach its peak effect.

For those who plan to receive both a season flu shot and the H1N1 vaccine, the recommendation is different.

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Dudley, Matzke and Dr. Craig Bartruff of Gothenburg Medical Arts recommend getting seasonal flu shots now.

That's because it's necessary to wait at least three weeks from the first shot before receiving the H1N1 vaccine, Bartruff said.

Accounts differ about when the H1N1 vaccine will be available—anywhere from the first week of October until the end of the month.

What is known is that the vaccine is only available to a limited number of people and not the general public.

"A lot of older people probably have some immunity to H1N1 already," Matzke said, noting that some sources say that those born between 1917 and 1957 probably have some protection from the virus.

With the exception of pregnant women, the doctor said people can receive the seasonal flu shot in mid October and the H1N1 shot three weeks later.

"There's been a significantly higher proportion of deaths of pregnant ladies from H1N1," he explained.

Bartruff said his clinic started offering the seasonal flu shot Monday and will have a flu shot clinic Wednesday.

"I have no qualms either way," he said about whether people receive the seasonal flu shot now or later. "In the past, we've waited until October so there's plenty of immunity in March and April."

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Dudley said GMH employees voluntarily began receiving the seasonal shot Monday, noting that GMH would have flu shot clinics soon.

She noted that so far, the hospital has not seen many—if any—seasonal flu patients.

Bartruff said his clinic has seen a lot of people with symptoms of typical flu but no positive test results of either influenza A or B.

Matzke said he saw some cases of H1N1 last summer but probably won't see seasonal flu cases until peak time in January and February.

However, he said he has seen several patients with upper respiratory infections including runny noses, low fevers and coughs.

Typical flu symptoms are a persistent dry cough, high fever and body aches, Matzke said.

He added that more people are in danger of dying from influenza A or B than H1N1.

Deb Saum, GMH medical technologist, said she's received confirmation of a couple of cases of H1N1 in the last six months.

To check for flu, she said physicians swab a patient's nostrils.

If the test is positive for influenza A, she said the test was sent to state health officials for confirmation.

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Matzke said sending individual tests to the state for confirmation of H1N1 is no longer done.

Myra Gronewold, GMH community health coordinator, said washing one's hands or using sanitizer is perhaps the best way to ward off the flu and other viruses and infections.

Gronewold said hands should be washed with soap for as long as it takes a person to sing the "Happy Birthday" song and sanitizer rubbed on hands until they are dry.

"Friction works it into the skin," she said.

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