



The New Flu: Are You At Risk?

Last year was the mildest flu season on record. However, experts are warning that the 2012 flu season is likely to be more serious.

"People cannot become complacent this year," said Dr. Howard Koh, assistant secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. Influenza strains constantly evolve, and some cause more illness than others. For example, two new strains of flu have begun circling the globe, and last year's flu shot won't offer protection against them.

One of the strains includes a new H3N2 strain, which tends to be harsher than other flu types.

So, what can you do?

The good news is that vaccines have been updated accordingly, and government reports are showing that they are working well to fight against these new strains. Only one ingredient in this year's flu vaccine was retained from last year's, protection against the H1N1 strain that caused the 2009 swine flu pandemic and has been the main kind of influenza circulating since. Also new in the 2012 shot is protection against a different Type B strain.

The bad news? Adults are still not getting vaccinated, particularly in the black community. A yearly vaccination is still the most recommended method of protection for nearly everybody. New figures show that last year, while 52 percent of children, only 39 percent of adults were immunized.

Seniors & The Flu

Seniors are at especially high risk of severe illness or death if they catch the flu, but just 66 percent of them were immunized, a number that has been slowly dropping for several years.

Older adults got a little lost in the recent public health push to explain that flu vaccine benefits all ages — and it's time to target them again, said Dr. Daniel Jernigan, a flu specialist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The only ones who shouldn't get vaccinated: babies younger than 6 months and people with severe allergies to the eggs used to make the vaccine.

What else do you need to know about the 2012 flu season?

Manufacturers are expected to make about 135 million doses of flu vaccine this year, and there are four different forms to choose from:

- The traditional flu shot is for all ages and people with high-risk health conditions.
- FluMist, the squirt-up-the-nose version, is for healthy people ages 2 to 49 who aren't pregnant.
- A high-dose shot is available for people 65 and older.
- The intradermal shot — a skin-deep prick instead of the usual inch-long needle — is available for 18- to 64-year-olds.
- The vaccine is covered by insurance, and Medicare and some plans don't require a copay; drugstore vaccination programs tend to charge about \$30.

People can be vaccinated anytime, but Jernigan cautioned that it takes about two weeks for protection to kick in. Flu typically starts to appear in October or November, and peaks in January or February.

Also this year, public health groups are urging workers in doctors' offices, hospitals and particularly nursing homes, where patients are especially vulnerable, to do a better job getting vaccinated.

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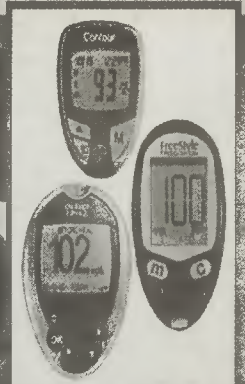
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