

New Influenza Strain



Ritu Pabla, Shinivar Gottipah and little Ruhaan meet with Dr. Susan Heaney about getting the H1N1 vaccination.

Boosts Fall Vaccinations

The global outbreak of a new influenza strain will add one or two vaccinations to the recommended fall schedule for children and teenagers this year

“The most recent recommendation is to immunize all children between six months and 18 years for the seasonal flu. Then we bring in another vaccination with the novel H1N1 flu vaccine that is under development and should be available in October,” said Susan Heaney, M.D., a member of the division of general academic pediatrics at SSM Cardinal Glennon Children’s Medical Center and a Saint Louis University associate professor of pediatrics.

“There will be a limited supply of the novel flu vaccine because it is new. The Centers for Disease Control has prioritized the order of who should be vaccinated – pregnant

women and school-age children will be first when the vaccine becomes available.”

Influenza is a respiratory illness caused by one of many viruses that can produce mild to severe symptoms and sometimes death. The symptoms may include fever, headache, tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches and stomach symptoms.

Novel H1N1 flu was referred to as swine flu until this summer, when laboratory tests showed that the virus was very different from viruses previously found in North American pigs and referred to as “swine flu.” In June the World Health Organization declared that a pandemic of H1N1 flu is underway.

The new H1N1 vaccine is being developed separately from the seasonal flu vaccine prepared each year so a separate

shot will be needed for each, said Heaney, who is vice president of medical affairs at Glennon. The addition of the H1N1 preparation to this year's schedule could mean four flu shots for very young children.

"If a child under nine years of age is being vaccinated for flu for the first time, the recommendation is that two vaccinations be given a month apart. Studies have shown that you will not develop adequate immunity with just one vaccination in your first year," she said.

"If a child is entering his second flu season and received only a single vaccination last year, it is recommended that he receive two this year. We have not heard what the CDC recommendation will be, but the new H1N1 vaccine could bring a third and possibly a fourth vaccination for some young children," she said.

Children being vaccinated for their third flu season should be given only one vaccination even if two were not administered in either of the previous years.

Annual flu vaccinations are recommended because a new seasonal flu vaccine is created each year based on international surveillance and predictions of the strains of virus that will circulate. Each seasonal vaccine contains three killed viruses that produce antibodies but are not capable of causing influenza.

For children who do not like shots, doctors can offer a nasal spray containing the seasonal flu vaccines. The spray, developed at Saint Louis University and other institutions, is intended for children over the age of two years.

"Surprisingly, a lot of kids don't want the spray when it is offered to them," Heaney said. "Some kids don't like having something put in their noses."

The H1N1 flu does not cause more severe symptoms than previous influenzas but poses a greater health risk because of its novelty, Heaney said. "It is similar in severity to the typical seasonal flus, but it can spread more rapidly because so many people have not been exposed to this type of virus in the past and have no immunity to it. When it was first recognized last spring, it swept through the population pretty quickly. This flu is unique in that it affects mostly children who have not been exposed to this type of virus. Older people have had some exposure to similar viruses."

The H1N1 vaccine is expected to be offered throughout the winter months, and Heaney recommends that all adults should be vaccinated when it is available to them. The community benefits of vaccinations will be greater this year due to the ability of H1N1 to spread quickly. "You are not getting a vaccination only for yourself but also for the young babies and sick children and other sick people you might expose to a virus if you have it," she said.

Parents also should be more careful about keeping sick children home during this school year, she said. "If you think your child has the flu or even a fever, sore throat or cough, they should not go to school. When children are at school, they should practice good cough etiquette by covering up their mouth when they sneeze and wash their hands frequently to keep them from spreading flu or other viruses to their classmates."

The number of vaccinations recommended for children and adolescents has increased tremendously in the past decade.

The current CDC schedule of recommended immunizations charts over 30 shots and one oral series from birth through the age of 18. These provide protection from fourteen infectious diseases, including some that used to be common occurrences of childhood.

"In the last ten years many new vaccinations have been added to the list," Heaney said. "The result has been a huge, successful public health initiative."

Vaccinations have eradicated polio and nearly ended infections caused by diseases such as smallpox and pertussis. "We still have a problem with pertussis because babies are susceptible in their first two months of life if they are around adults who have not been immunized," Heaney said.



Susan Heaney, M.D.

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"When I was in training as a resident, we saw haemophilus influenzae meningitis all the time. It was fatal sometimes and could be devastating in terms of neurologic damage and hearing loss. We haven't seen haemophilus influenzae meningitis at this hospital in more than 10 years. I used to see babies who had rubella syndrome and deafness. Now our residents never see those infections.

"I had measles as a child, and everybody I grew up with had measles," Heaney said. "I think I have seen one case of measles as a physician."

For more information on influenza and vaccinations, parents my visit the web site of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov.