

New flu vaccines available, doctors explain the big picture

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COLUMBUS, GA (WTVM) -

With the start of September comes the officially recognized flu season, and doctors are recommending you get your shots sooner rather than later.

When it comes to the flu, doctors say it's much more serious than your common cold. Adults who receive the virus compare it to being hit by a bus. It's almost a guaranteed ticket to spending several days in bed and healthcare professionals recommend vaccination every flu season.

"So the sooner you get it, the sooner you're protected and the flu is very unpredictable. We don't know whether it's going to hit in September or January," said Dr. Ritu Chandra of Phenix City Children's. "I get mine early in the season."

"There is a flu season, but unfortunately the flu doesn't seem to want to follow the flu season dates that we've set up, so you can catch the flu any time of the year," said Columbus Department of Public Health spokesperson, Pamela Fair.

This year, immunologists have developed a quadrivalent flu vaccine that protects against the flu better than ever before.

"Up until now, every year, the flu vaccine had protection against three strains of the flu. This is the first year we have vaccines- several of them on the market- that protect against four strains of the flu," said Dr. Chandra.

As medical experts explained, there is more than one strain of flu, way more than just four- and they are constantly mutating to avoid detection. But big picture thinkers at the CDC are examining cases and trends throughout the world to determine which strains are most likely to make an appearance each year.

The top candidates for each new season are included in the vaccine. Doctors urge the public, even mothers who are pregnant or nursing, to protect themselves against the flu.

"A lot of people are afraid, there's a lot of misinformation online, mercury toxicity, is this going to cause my child autism, am I going to get the actual flu- none of that has been shown to have any basis in fact. Every bit of that has been debunked," said Dr. Julie Roberts of North Columbus Family Medicine.

You may think you're in the category of people who don't normally get sick or can fight it off quickly, but Roberts said getting the vaccine is not just about you. Borrowing a phrase from the animal kingdom, when every member of the "herd" becomes immune (including the strong ones) it puts the weaker members in a better position.

"Herd immunity is where healthy people get vaccinated to protect the unhealthy people. The six-month-old and younger babies that can't be vaccinated, the people with HIV or diabetes, poor immune systems, cancer, that can't make their own antibodies to the flu. Those are the people who die from the flu. And if we, as healthy people, can get vaccinated and not get everyone else sick, we actually keep the people who would likely die or end up in the hospital out of the hospital," said Dr. Roberts.

Doctors and health officials are of the unanimous opinion that the benefits of getting the flu vaccine far outweigh the supposed drawbacks.

Of the two methods currently available, doctors say you may feel some soreness at the site of injection from the shot, and the nasal spray may give you some common cold symptoms for one or two days. But they insist these are way better alternatives to catching the actual flu. In fact, one doctor says the cold symptoms are a good sign because it shows your body is developing flu defenses.

The Columbus Department of Public Health, along with hospitals and doctor's offices throughout the area, are offering the vaccine to everyone six months of age and older. More information is available at www.columbushealth.com