

10-12-18 Flu and You What to Do

I have recently been listening to The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. It has been fascinating to learn more about the well-known man of whom I knew little. The other day, while on my way to work, thinking about our Flu Prevention Clinic, I heard the following excerpt:

“In 1736 I lost one of my sons, a fine boy of four years old, by the smallpox taken in the common way. I long regretted bitterly and still regret that I had not given it to him by inoculation. This I mention for the sake of the parents who omit that operation, on the supposition that they should never forgive themselves if a child died under it; my example showing that the regret may be the same either way, and that, therefore, the safer should be chosen.”

To this day, scientists, including physicians, strive to provide the best guidance on the safest choices. How do you decide what your best choice is?

Our recent Seasonal Flu Prevention Clinic was hosted by Stop & Shop. Our notifications for these clinics always end with “For questions, call the Halifax Board of Health at 781-293-6738”.

And there usually are questions. Asking them is a good thing. A recent call to my office reminded me of the importance of teaching and learning through conversations with the public. We should never assume people have an accurate understanding of something just because the topic receives a lot of attention. The call was one of many inquiring about the availability of flu shots. As I explained the seasonal occurrence to this woman back in September, I thought she might be relieved and convinced that there was plenty of time. That is when I discovered the real reason behind her anxiety. She was going to Boston and was worried that the city crowds had all sorts of colds and germs and she was hoping to get her shot before she went. I told her that the “flu shot” only protects us against the seasonal influenza; not against the common cold or any other virus or bacteria carried by people in crowds. Our best defense against that onslaught is frequent hand washing and other good hygiene habits. I think she was both disappointed and relieved with my response. I was glad for the learning opportunity she gave me. The flu shot does not prevent colds. I had never thought to point that out before. For more information on influenza vaccinations, go <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/qa/misconceptions.htm>

While not preventing the common cold, the seasonal influenza vaccination is an important public health program aimed at preventing the annual cases of hospitalizations and a death toll usually ranging from 3,000 to 49,000 in the USA alone. The actual numbers vary year to year, with some influenza viruses being deadlier than others. Last year, at least 80,000 people in the USA died from influenza. Many statistical studies confirm that about 90% of the deaths are consistently in people over 65 years of age.

With numbers like that, it is understandable why our senior citizens get anxious about getting this vaccine. They are also more likely to develop the complication of pneumonia with the flu and should talk to their physician about receiving the pneumonia vaccination. It is not needed each year.

We learned so much from 2008-09 H1N1, including the value of team work, the ability to set up emergency dispensing sites and the willingness of people to volunteer. It also served to highlight the importance of vaccinations, with many schools getting involved for the first time in decades. Attention was brought to the importance of pregnant women getting vaccinated and the importance of people involved in childcare of infants getting vaccinated to protect themselves and reduce the chances of infants being exposed to influenza.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all people six months of age and older be vaccinated for seasonal influenza. And that is the main message, but here are a few ways of saying it:

Don't Wait; Vaccinate

The Flu Ends with U (unless you get it and then it doesn't end with you. It spreads to others.) So....

Spread Fun; Not the Flu

And from Benjamin Franklin: "The safer should be chosen."

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us

