

10-5-12 Inform and Be Informed: Really Simple

Many years ago, I asked my oldest son, who was visiting and looking at his laptop one morning, “Where did that list of websites come from that you’re looking at?” He answered casually, “Oh, that’s my morning reading. It’s how I stay in touch. I guess it’s the replacement of reading the morning newspaper, except that I get to choose what’s sent to me. I get it from my RSS feed.” He was kind and patient with his Mom, as he explained the RSS feed. I had always wondered about that little icon and what those letters meant but I did not grow up with permission to just play with buttons! It’s a whole new world now and that new world can be tailored to your needs and interests.

RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication. You choose the topics, with specific “tags” or identifying topics and computers scan for those matching key words. You then receive headlines and titles of news articles and you can decide what to read. It’s pretty cool. The little “button” looks like radio waves emanating out from one spot in the lower left corner. It brings to mind the iconic image of my childhood of the RKO radio antenna standing on top of the earth, sending its signals to the world. Those radio signals played a crucial role in WWI and the RSS feed now informs people of all walks of life, including playing a critical role in public health.

It was via the RSS feed that I was recently reading about the influenza variant causing some human cases from contact with pigs. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Since July 2012, 305 cases of infection with influenza A (H3N2) variant (H3N2v) virus containing the influenza A (H1N1)pdm09 M gene have occurred in multiple U.S. states, primarily associated with swine exposure at agricultural fairs.”

While most cases were mild enough that people were able to stay at home and recover, one woman, aged 61, with some underlying conditions died from this “flu”. Almost all the other victims were children. Many of them were hospitalized for dehydration and released a day later. When the children were under five years old and had an underlying condition, such as asthma, they were more likely to suffer from a more serious case and require more medical attention.

There were so many of these cases in Ohio that doctors and hospitals were encouraged to test for the H3N2v any time they saw Influenza Like Illness (ILI). CDC defines the ILI simply as fever greater than or equal to $\geq 100^{\circ}\text{F}$, with cough or sore throat. If it hadn’t been for CDC’s fast action and the cooperation of state departments of public health and the willingness to take advice, on the part of physicians, the pieces of the puzzle would be still be out there, all a jumble, without forming a picture. Instead, it would simply have been seen as early cases of “influenza like illness”. We can’t appreciate the big picture; we can’t identify trends and we can’t prevent what we don’t recognize, if there are no diagnoses!

CDC's recommendation is that anyone who is at high risk for influenza, such as children, pregnant women, the elderly and anyone with underlying conditions such as diabetes, asthma or compromised immune systems, avoid contact with swine and that they be vaccinated against influenza. It is also their recommendation for people who are not at high risk but who wish to reduce their chances of this illness, also avoid contact with swine.

The vaccine is readily available this year, with small clinics appearing everywhere at supermarkets and pharmacies. Sometimes children miss out on this important vaccination just because of their birth date. Since each year's vaccine is slightly different, aimed at the currently circulating influenza variations, a child born in the spring or summer and not due for a check-up for another year, might miss out. If your child's doctor does not remind you to make a fall appointment for this vaccination, speak up and make that appointment yourself!

While many people can afford the co-pay or fee at commercial clinics, many are also waiting for the free vaccination with their local board of health. I don't blame them. Each year, there is the frustration of waiting for the good news that our public health nurse has received the vaccine. We are able to give it for free because our department of public health purchases it for us and then distributes it. Individual practices and commercial enterprises are able to acquire their vaccine right away.

Getting ready to move to Florida for the winter? Are you at high risk for complications? Get your vaccination anywhere you can. If money is tight and every little bit of savings count, you will be able to get the vaccination soon. I just can't say exactly when at this moment. I'll spread the word as soon as I know, though. I'll spread it through "old fashioned" ways and new fashion ways, as they are all needed.

Life is not Really Simple but I'm glad the RSS feed is there to keep us informed.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. It is really simple to reach her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us