

10-24-14 Spread Fun, Not the Flu

Halifax finally has enough vaccine to host our Seasonal Flu Prevention Clinic on Monday, October 27, from 3:00 pm – 5:00 pm at Halifax Town Hall in the Great Hall. There are no special criteria required this year, such as a health condition. Flu shots will be offered to adults 18 and over, with our public health nurses preferring that children receive vaccinations at their pediatrician's office. 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.

Sometimes the calls begin in September, even though we don't usually see the influenza cases begin until November and peaking in January. However, every year is different and it could begin as early as October and could continue until May.

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. (She did not mention Ebola. I suppose those calls will begin soon.) 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 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.

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 ranging from 3,000 to 49,000 in the USA alone. The actual numbers vary year to year, with some influenza viruses being more deadly than others. Many statistical studies confirm that about 90% of the deaths are consistently in people over 65 years of age. (For more information on those statistics go to http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/us_flu-related_deaths.htm)

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.

This year's vaccine is, as usual, a combo vaccine designed to prevent what has been circulating in other parts of the world. As the virus drifts around the globe, sometimes it changes.

The USA usually benefits from having the luxury of watching that developing drift and tailoring the vaccine to that year's variation. In 2009 we were taken by surprise when H1N1 developed close to home and we became concerned about travelers from Mexico. We learned so much from that year's situation, 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 in order to protect themselves and reduce the chances of infants being exposed to influenza.

Sadly, upon tragedy, Liberia is experiencing a reversal in public health advances, with people reluctant to visit health care centers for routine vaccinations, such as measles, because of the fear of coming in contact with Ebola. While the fear is understandable, this setback will result in even more death and morbidity.

In the hopes of reducing, as much as possible, death and morbidity from influenza, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) tells us all of the 2014-2015 influenza vaccine is made to protect against the following three viruses:

- an A/California/7/2009 (H1N1)pdm09-like virus
- an A/Texas/50/2012 (H3N2)-like virus
- a B/Massachusetts/2/2012-like virus.

Some of the 2014-2015 flu vaccine also protects against an additional B virus (B/Brisbane/60/2008-like virus). When that fourth layer of protection is added, it is called a quadrivalent vaccine.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all people six months of age and older be vaccinated for seasonal influenza. 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 actually get it and then it doesn't end with you. It spreads to others.) So....

Spread Fun; Not the Flu

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