



Missouri Focused On A Challenging Flu Season

A shortage of the H1N1 flu vaccine across the country and in Missouri has prompted state health department officials to take additional action to ensure that those most vulnerable to the H1N1 flu virus — pregnant women and young children — have priority access to the vaccine, if they choose.

The state so far has received only about 12,000 doses of the preservative-free vaccine recommended for pregnant women — and to date also has not received any shipments of the preservative-free vaccine that can be given to young children under age 2. In response, Missouri's top health official recently granted an exemption so that those groups can legally have access to the preservative vaccine, which contains small traces of mercury-based preservative.

The only H1N1 vaccine available in the state without the preservative uses a live, but weakened virus. Therefore it can be used only for healthy individuals ages 2 through 49. Because current state law prohibits vaccine with the preservative from being given to pregnant women or children under 3, many pregnant women and parents of children under age 2 had no way to get vaccinated.

The exemption now allows pregnant women to choose either to get the vaccine with the preservative, or they can choose to wait until more supplies of the preservative-free vaccine are available. Likewise, parents of infants under 2 will have that same option. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services state that there is no danger to pregnant women and their fetuses or to children from the preservative in the vaccine. However, the Legislature felt there was enough evidence questioning preservatives such as Thimerosal and other mercury-based preservatives to initiate the ban on those types of vaccines from being used in Missouri for pregnant women and children under the age of two. I urge all pregnant women and parents of young children to consult their health care providers, educate themselves on the different types of vaccines and use their best judgment as to what is best for your family in the determination on which type and whether any vaccine is appropriate for them.

State health officials predict it is going to be a very rough flu season. In the first two weeks of the flu season, nearly 5,400 cases of flu have been documented in Missouri compared to single digit numbers at this time in a typical year. Missourians are encouraged to get the H1N1 vaccine as it becomes available, along with the seasonal flu vaccine, as the seasonal flu vaccine is unlikely to provide protection against the H1N1 virus.

Recently, the health department set up a toll-free number to provide around-the-clock H1N1 flu and vaccine information to Missouri residents. The number, 1-877-FLU-4141 (1-877-358-4141) will be answered 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Specialists with the *H1N1 InfoLine* will answer questions about flu symptoms, when to seek medical care and ways to limit the spread of the flu, including questions about the new vaccine. Health care professionals can also call the toll-free number for more information about the H1N1 flu and vaccine.

H1N1 flu symptoms include fever, cough, body aches and sore throat. Most cases are relatively mild to moderate and do not require treatment. Most people with H1N1 flu can recover at home. They should get plenty of liquids, take over-the-counter medication to reduce their fever and stay home and rest.

Health department officials are encouraging Missourians to do everything they can to prevent the spread of flu and keep their families healthy. Vaccines, including the aerosol mist and the flu shot, are the single best way to prevent influenza, including the new H1N1 flu.

The following groups of people should have priority access to the H1N1 vaccine:

- Pregnant women
- Household contacts and caregivers for children younger than 6 months of age
- Health care and emergency medical services personnel
- All people ages 6 months through 24 years of age
- Persons ages 25 through 64 years who have health conditions associated with higher risk of medical complications from influenza. (Studies show that older people are less at risk because they appear to have some degree of resistance to the virus.)
- People 65 and older are encouraged to get the H1N1 vaccine once those priority groups have been vaccinated.
- In the meantime, people 50 and older are recommended to get a seasonal flu vaccine.

In addition to the vaccine, basic flu prevention practices can help control the spread of the flu. These include washing your hands frequently, covering your cough, and staying home from work or school if you are sick.

For more information about the flu, go to the state health department's Web site at www.dhss.mo.gov. To learn more about obtaining the H1N1 flu vaccine, please call the local health department at one of the following locations:

St. Charles County Health Department — (636) 949-7400

Lincoln County Health Department — (636) 528-6117

As always, if you have any questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.

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