Preventing and Treating Influenza

The severity of influenza varies from year to year and even from person to person. In some seasons, circulating influenza viruses will cause more severe, debilitating, and deadly illness. Public health officials track influenza very closely as it circulates across the world. Having watched it closely for many years, officials understand how unpredictable it can be. Since it is not possible to know in advance how severe a coming season will be or how sick an individual will get due to influenza, prevention is critical.

Universal Recommendation:
In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that everyone age 6 months and older get an influenza vaccine each year. This universal recommendation is based on decades of progress in vaccine development and production and constantly increasing knowledge of how flu viruses work. Universal influenza vaccination is important because:

- Influenza is unpredictable and can kill or hospitalized even the healthiest people, including children.
- Vaccination is a safe and effective preventive health action with potential benefits for all populations.
- Many people are unaware that they have an underlying condition that puts them at high risk of flu-related complications.

Influenza Vaccination is:

- The best method available to prevent influenza.
- Updated annually to protect against the influenza strains most likely to circulate each season.
- More effective at preventing infection in young, healthy adults. But even when vaccination does not prevent infection completely, it can lessen the severity of the disease and prevent the most serious complications of influenza, including hospitalization and death.

The FDA carefully tests each batch of influenza vaccine before it is released. More than 100 million people in the U.S. are safely vaccinated each year.

This year, more vaccine options than ever before are available, with one or more type of influenza vaccine that is right for everyone:

- Traditional injected vaccine is the most common vaccine available. It includes inactivated (or killed) virus and is approved for everyone age 6 months and older. Most of the traditional vaccines available this year include three influenza strains (two type A and one type B), but some include four strains (adding a second influenza type B strain).
- Intradermal vaccine uses a smaller needle because it is injected into the skin instead of the muscle like traditional injected vaccine. This vaccine includes inactivated (or killed) virus and is approved for adults age 18–64 years. For 2013-14, intradermal vaccine includes three influenza strains (two type A and one type B).
- High-dose vaccine is specially formulated for people age 65 years and older. It contains four times the amount of antigen to help those 65 and older build a greater immune response. For the 2013-14 season, high-dose vaccine includes three influenza strains (two type A and one type B).
- Nasal spray vaccine includes activated or live, but weakened virus and is approved for healthy people age 2–49 years, who are not pregnant. It is given as a spray that must be inhaled through the nostrils. The nasal spray vaccine includes four strains for the 2013-14 season (two each of influenza type A and B).
Recombinant vaccine is injected with a needle like traditional vaccine, but it is made using an egg-free production method. It is approved for adults age 18—49 years. The recombinant vaccine includes three influenza strains for the 2013-14 season (two type A and one type B).

**Vaccine Availability:**
For the 2013-2014 season, influenza vaccine supplies are plentiful, with about 135 million doses anticipated to be available in the U.S. Vaccination is recommended as soon as the vaccine is available and will continue to be recommended throughout the season. There are many locations that now offer influenza vaccine, including:

- Physician and other healthcare professional offices
- Public health departments
- Drug and retail stores
- Workplaces
- Schools

Many insurance plans pay for annual influenza vaccination. Individuals covered by Medicare Part B can get the influenza vaccine and the pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine, which is recommended for everyone age 65 years and older, at no cost (no co-pay, no deductible).

**Antiviral Medications:**

- Prescription antiviral medications play an important role in treatment of influenza and in some cases may also help prevent its spread.
- Oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) and zanamivir (Relenza®) are antiviral drugs recommended by the CDC for patients based on age and risk factors.
- When taken within 48 hours of symptom onset, antiviral drugs can reduce influenza symptoms and shorten the length of illness.
- In some circumstances, antiviral medications can be given to individuals exposed to influenza to prevent the infection from developing.
- Antiviral drugs can also prevent serious flu complications *(for more information, see the fact sheet “Antiviral Drugs for Influenza Prevention and Treatment”).*

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