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Issue Highlights

Is the Flu Shot Right for You? **01**

Those at Risk for Flu Complications **01**

Vaccine Safety: Don't Be Scared Sick

Childhood Immunizations **02**

Those at Risk for Flu Complications

- Even if in excellent health, adults ages 65 and older have a greater risk of complications from the flu and should get their vaccinations early.

- Children 6 to 23 months are among the most likely to be hospitalized for influenza. Young children in this age group need to be protected by receiving a flu shot.

- Adults and children with chronic health problems, including asthma or other ongoing lung conditions, kidney disease, heart disease and diabetes.

- Adults and children who have lowered immune systems from an illness such as HIV or AIDS, or from undergoing a medical treatment such as chemotherapy.

- Children and teenagers between 6 months and 18 years old who are receiving long-term

Is the Flu Shot Right for You?

Influenza, or the flu, is a highly contagious viral infection of the upper respiratory system. For many, the flu simply causes a few days of misery. For others, it can lead to pneumonia or even death.

Each year, anywhere from 5 to 20 percent of the U.S. population contracts the flu virus. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 3,000 and 49,000 people die from the seasonal flu virus each year, and another 200,000 need to be admitted to the hospital due to flu-related complications.

Anyone can contract the flu and the serious complications it may cause. However, some people are more susceptible to these complications, which can include pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus or ear infections. In addition, the flu can cause other chronic health problems to worsen. For example, people with asthma may experience serious asthma attacks while they have the flu, and chronic congestive heart failure may worsen if a sufferer contracts the flu.

Medical experts recommend that most

people receive a flu shot every year to help prevent it, reduce its severity and avoid its complications. Additionally, because some people are at a high risk for severe illnesses from the flu (see sidebar), they are advised to make an effort to get a flu vaccination early in the flu season (September through November).

People ages 50 to 64, regardless of their health condition, are also advised to get a flu shot. Age alone does not automatically put them at a high-risk; however, millions of people in this age group have one or more high-risk medical conditions. Even without a medical condition, the flu shot can help those in this age group avoid missing work and/or paying for costly medical visits and medication.

Some people should not get the flu shot. These groups include children under 6 months of age and people who previously developed Guillain-Barre Syndrome. People who are allergic to eggs used to not be able to get a flu shot as well, but the development of an egg-free vaccine has eliminated this barrier. Just be sure to make the shot provider aware of an egg allergy beforehand. ◊

Vaccine Safety: Don't Be Scared Sick

Vaccines are one of the best ways to help prevent serious and even deadly diseases. However, some people fear that the risks of complications from vaccines outweigh their effectiveness.

Many are reluctant to receive vaccinations, or to provide the proper immunizations for their children. In the United States, vaccines must meet stringent safety standards and are continuously monitored for safety and effectiveness. Because of this, not receiving all of the appropriate vaccinations could put your child and other children they come in contact with at risk for contracting potentially fatal diseases.

Typically, vaccines cause no side effects other than mild soreness at the injection site and a mild fever. However, while vaccines are extremely safe, they can occasionally cause adverse reactions. Very rarely do vaccine recipients have an allergic reaction; however, on occasion, some patients may not respond to the vaccine, causing them to contract the disease or infection the vaccine was meant to prevent.

While vaccines are effective for most people, some should not be vaccinated (see article on Page 1). For example, if you have had an allergic reaction to any vaccine in the past, you should not receive that particular vaccine until speaking with your physician. In addition, people with compromised immune systems (such as those afflicted with HIV or AIDS) should work with their doctors to determine whether they should receive certain vaccinations at all. ◊

Childhood Immunizations

Regular visits to your pediatrician or family physician are an important way to help ensure your child stays in good health. In addition to regular doctor visits, immunizations are an important way to protect your child against many dangerous diseases and infections.

Today, immunizations typically given to babies and young children include: hepatitis B; polio; measles, mumps, and rubella; diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis; haemophilus influenzae type B; pneumococcal infections; and chickenpox.

It is recommended that children receive all of these immunizations before age 2 to ensure protection during their most vulnerable period. For detailed immunization guidelines and a month-to-month immunization chart, please visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines. ◊

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Those at Risk for Flu Complications

aspirin therapy and could develop Reye syndrome if they get the flu.

- Women who will be at least three months pregnant during the flu season require a flu shot.

In addition, those who live or work with people in these high-risk groups are advised to get flu shots:

- Adults and children who are household contacts or caregivers for others at high risk of severe illness from the flu.

- Health care workers with daily exposure to sick people.

- Household contacts or caregivers for children under age 2. Infants younger than 6 months cannot get a flu shot, but can still contract the flu. Their best protection is nonexposure.

- Anyone who lives in a nursing home or chronic care facility for people of any age. ◊