

# TO YOUR HEALTH

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## VACCINE UPDATE

By Barbara Chenoweth, NP

As the flu season approaches, most of us look for the arrival of the flu vaccine and plan to get a “shot.” What was once a simple action has become more complicated. In the news are reports of new flu vaccines for older people including Fluzone, and now Fluzone High Dose.

This newest vaccine, Fluzone High Dose, like the regular flu vaccine contains three strains of the flu, including the swine flu or H1N1 flu. But Fluzone High Dose also contains four times more of the amount of antigens that fight off flu viruses than in the regular flu vaccine. It is hoped that the larger number of antigens will be more effective. This is because older people tend to make 50 to 75% fewer antibodies from the vaccine than do younger people. However, it is not yet known if the greater number of antigens in Fluzone High Dose will actually translate into fewer cases of the flu.

Studies are underway to determine just how effective Fluzone High Dose really is. In the meantime, it has been approved by the FDA with the provision that studies will continue to evaluate this question. In the future this may be the vaccine of choice. Until the jury is in, it should be noted that this high dose vaccine is more expensive and has more side effects. The common side effects are fever and soreness at the site of the injection for the following week. People with a history of sensitivity to the flu vaccine or who have an allergy to eggs should not take the Fluzone High Dose, ([www.MayoClinic.com](http://www.MayoClinic.com)).

And while the search continues for a stronger vaccine, The Center for Disease

Control (CDC) has come out with a new recommendation that everyone over the age of 6 months should receive the flu vaccine. Usually it's best to take the vaccine in October or November because it lasts for only six months. It becomes effective two weeks after one receives it. Taking the flu vaccine is one of the most important ways to prevent the flu.

Remember that the flu or influenza is a respiratory illness, characterized by a high fever, cough, profound fatigue and achiness. It should not be confused with the GI flu, also a virus infection, that causes nausea, diarrhea and sometimes vomiting. Nor should it be confused with a cold, a mild viral infection with nasal congestion, cough and low-grade fever that runs its course in about seven days. When one becomes ill with the flu or influenza, one is really ill!

And this is why the flu/influenza is so dangerous for older people. Once ill with the viral infection, it is quite possible that a bacterial infection will follow. Bacterial infections such as pneumonia and bronchitis commonly occur when one's immune system is lowered by influenza. Fatalities from influenza usually stem from complications like pneumonia and bronchitis, especially if a person has a pre-existing, chronic condition such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or cancer.

In addition to preventing flu/influenza by taking the flu vaccine, hand washing has been found to be the next most important individual practice. The flu and cold viruses can live up to 48 hours. They live best on hard surfaces such as stainless

(*Vaccine Update continued*) steel or plastic. Soft surfaces like fabrics are less friendly to viruses. The flu virus lives longer than the cold virus and is spread most commonly by direct person contact. Shaking hands or touching another person are the usual ways that viruses are transmitted. Less often a person touches a hard surface that is contaminated by sneezes and coughs. Nonetheless, if a surface is contaminated by numerous viruses, the chance of catching one is greater. Besides the number or amount of virus germs, temperature and humidity play a role in keeping viruses alive and ready to find a new victim.

Hand washing cannot be over-emphasized. It prevents one from shaking hands with a contaminated person and then rubbing the eyes or touching the mouth. Influenza travels by “droplets” that carry the virus through sneezes and coughs. Breaking their pathway prevents illness.

Another preventive measure may be exercise. A recent study reported in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* (September 2010) tracked 1,000 adults from 18 to 85 years of age over a 12-week period. It found that those who exercised five or more days a week had 43% fewer days of cold symptoms than those who exercised one or fewer days per week. The severity of symptoms reported by the active study participants was 31% less than the least active, (*Food & Fitness Advisor*, Weill Cornell Medical College, January 2011). While exercise may offer protection from the severity of colds, it is unclear if it protects from influenza in the same way.

A known way to protect older people from the complications of influenza, especially pneumonia, is to assure that all people over 65 years receive the pneumonia vaccine. This vaccine should be repeated, at least once, when a person has chronic medical conditions. Since it is the comp-

lications of influenza that present the greatest risk, the CDC also recently recommended that people over 65 also receive the Tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap) vaccine.

The Tdap vaccine includes protection from pertussis or whooping cough. Because there has been a rise in pertussis, especially in young children, older people who have contact with children may be at risk. Whooping cough is a bacterial infection with a characteristic cough or whooping that often occurs a couple of weeks after an initial respiratory infection. This vaccine can be taken no matter how much or how little time has passed since the last tetanus and diphtheria vaccine (Td), *Harvard Women's Health*, April 2011).

In conclusion, check that all your vaccines are up to date, be sure to have your annual flu vaccine, wash your hands and stay healthy!

The Annual Walk-In Flu Vaccine Clinics will be held in the



Left on Wednesday October 12th & Friday October 14th from 10:00am - 12:00pm.

The Bedford Police will be picking up unused over-the-counter and prescription medications at the Clinic on Friday October 28th.

Please bring your unused medications for disposal between 8:30 am and 2:30 pm. Medications cannot be accepted by the Clinic on any other days or times.



*“Do Men and Women Grieve Differently?”* This month’s series on coping with grief will be presented on Thursday, October 13th in the Auditorium at 10:30am.