

Who needs a flu shot?

By Dr Gita Mathai

Come the monsoon and everyone invariably comes down with the flu. Even in its mildest avatar — runny nose and a slight temperature — it can temporarily incapacitate someone above 70. A more vile version comes with severe body ache, sore throat, a stubborn temperature and more in different permutations and combinations. Professionals in a hurry to rush back to work often return before they have completely recovered and very often fall ill again, even as they spread the infection to colleagues.

Yes, influenza or the flu is a highly infectious seasonal disease. Although most of the time one recovers completely, it can on occasion cause serious complications such as viral pneumonia or secondary bacterial pneumonia. Inflammation of the heart, brain or muscles and failure of multiple organs can also happen, but those are rare.

Till about a 100 years ago, there was no medical shield against the flu. But sometime in the 1930s, the flu shot was discovered and today it is the best available protection. The vaccine began to be manufactured in India in 2010.

The flu shot does not prevent every case of flu but it reduces the risk of catching the disease. And in case one has the flu, it lowers the likelihood of it becoming severe or developing complications.

Time it

The best time to get vaccinated is just before the flu season. In India, that depends on the region. Many areas experience increased cases dur-

ing the monsoon, while some have flu peaking in winter.

September is the time to get your annual shot to protect against the flu wave in winter. An injectable vaccine usually has four strains of inactivated viruses, two of Influenza A and two of Influenza B.

Influenza A viruses circulate in birds and animals. These can cross over to humans, resulting in bird flu and swine flu. So yes, the flu shot can protect you against the swine flu that is now going around. But that protection will only kick in two weeks after you get the vaccine.

Guidelines

Children below nine years of age who are being vaccinated for the first time would require two doses at least four weeks apart. Most others require one yearly dose. The flu virus mutates continuously and rapidly, and the vaccine is updated every year to target the specific strains expected to circulate that year.

Flu shots are recommended for everyone over six months but the WHO Global Influenza Programme lists the priority groups for vaccination as pregnant women, health workers, older adults, individuals with specific chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, heart, lung or kidney diseases and immunodeficiencies, and children aged six months to eight years.

The Union ministry of health and family welfare has advised that those with Guillain Barré Syndrome — a disorder of the nervous system — and children who have had a serious allergic reaction to a flu shot before or have severe egg allergy

should not be given the shot. Immunocompromised individuals too should avoid it. This would include people undergoing cancer or HIV treatment or those who have had an organ transplant.

On offer

Several injectable influenza vaccines are available in India under different brand names. Choose the appropriate vaccine in consultation with your doctor.

It is a myth that the vaccine will give you flu. But it may give you low-grade fever, body ache and soreness.

A nasal-spray flu vaccine is also available but it is not suitable for everyone. Pregnant women; immunocompromised individuals; children younger than two years; those who have asthma, a cerebrospinal-fluid leak or cochlear implant; children taking aspirin or salicylates and anyone who recently took influenza antivirals may not be eligible.

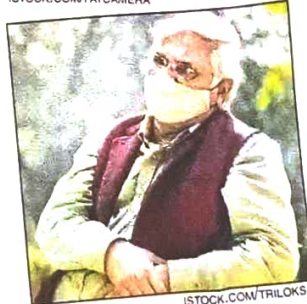
Remember, the flu shot protects only against influenza viruses. Covid-19, RSV and several other respiratory viruses can produce similar symptoms, but the flu shot does not protect against them.

Sometimes, it is suggested that multiple vaccinations be taken together to save time. You can take vaccinations for flu, pneumonia and shingles — also known as herpes zoster — at the same time without any ill effects except low grade fever and mild fatigue. Just make sure you take them on different limbs.

The writer has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*.



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