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Flu vaccination myth busting mission

To help people wade through the myths and facts, Gail Stockford, Information Manager busts some of the most common myths

Common myths about seasonal flu vaccine

MYTH 1: The flu vaccine causes flu

How many times have you heard this one? Everyone knows somebody, who knows somebody who, after getting the flu jab, 'came down ill with flu'. But is this true? No! The flu vaccine contains **no** live virus – the viruses used to create the vaccine are inactivated – and cannot cause flu.

It is possible that people have caught another bug, such as a cold, around the same time and so think that their sniffles are caused by the vaccine.

There is also a small chance of catching flu for a few days after having the jab because the vaccine takes 7-14 days to produce protection. So you may have the jab, then come into contact with someone with flu in this time and come down with the illness.

All vaccines elicit an immune response. Some of these responses can include a mild fever and headache, amounting to 'flu-like' symptoms. This could result in the mistaken belief that the vaccine has given them 'the flu', these side effects may occur with many different types of vaccines.

MYTH 2: The side effects outweigh the benefits

Some side effects should be expected. Some people get a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days and their arm may feel a bit sore where they were injected. Any other reactions are very rare.

But the likelihood and discomfort of this should be weighed up against the nasty symptoms of flu.

MYTH 3: Flu isn't that bad – I'll take my chances

Anyone who has had 'flu' and says it is no big deal has probably not had flu.

If you are lying in bed ill and even moving your head slightly feels like it is going to 'explode' and you have no energy to even get out of bed or watch TV then you probably have flu.

Right now, feeling fit and healthy, it's easy to think that flu is nothing. But if you end up bed-bound over Christmas then you may think that the flu jab is not such a bad idea.

MYTH 4: I wash my hands often – I don't need a vaccine too

The good news is that these people have heard the message about how good hygiene and hand washing can help prevent flu. The bad news is that people mistakenly believe that hand washing alone will prevent flu.

If you are doing everything else you can to stop yourself catching flu – why not go the whole way and have the flu jab too?

MYTH 5: Only people in 'at-risk' groups need the flu vaccine

Young children and the elderly are at high risk from seasonal flu complications, but people of all ages can become sick – and they can pass the virus on to others.

By getting the flu jab you are not only protecting yourself but those you come into contact with too.

MYTH 6: Getting a flu jab is too much hassle

The vaccine takes a matter of seconds to do - contact your GP for more details.

MYTH 7: Flu jabs don't work

Every year scientists develop vaccines based on the strain of flu going round. The vast majority of times the match is successful and the jab will protect you from the type of strain of flu going round. And if you are unlucky enough to catch a less common strain of flu going round then the vaccine you have had can still minimise symptoms and speed up recovery.

The currently available flu vaccines give 70-80% protection against infection with flu virus strains closely matching those in the vaccine.

In the elderly, protection against infection may be less, but immunisation has been shown to reduce the incidence of bronchopneumonia, hospital admissions and mortality.

MYTH 8: Vaccines aren't safe – the Government is testing them on us!

Before you believe the X Files-style conspiracies, you should know that before vaccines are passed as safe for use they are rigorously tested on thousands of people in large clinical trials. These trials are strictly monitored for safety.

The majority of problems thought to be related to the administration of a vaccine are actually not due to the vaccine itself. Many are coincidental events that just happen to be linked in time to immunisation.

MYTH 9: I don't have the time to have two separate vaccines like last year

Last year was exceptionally unusual as due to swine flu a second vaccine had to be created to supplement the seasonal flu vaccine.

The good news is that protection against swine flu (H1N1) has been incorporated into the main seasonal flu vaccine so you only need one jab.

MYTH 10: Vaccines weaken or overwhelm the immune system

Some people worry that vaccines weaken or overwhelm the immune system, particularly when given to babies or when multiple vaccines are given at the same time. Vaccines do not weaken the immune system. They strengthen it by inducing protection against specific diseases and viruses.

Children are exposed to many foreign antigens (a substance that causes the production of antibodies in the body) on a daily basis through activities such as routine eating, drinking and playing.

Children's immune systems are very robust and are designed to respond to multiple challenges. Vaccines only contain a small number of antigens in comparison to what children encounter every day in their environment and do not overwhelm or 'use up' the immune system.

MYTH 11: Vaccines cause or worsen asthma and allergies

There are many studies that have examined whether wheezing occurs more commonly after children with asthma receive vaccines, and it is clear that this is not the case. It is especially important that children with asthma be vaccinated, as catching a disease like flu can make an asthma attack worse.

Vaccines or their components can cause allergic reactions. However, allergy and anaphylaxis are extremely rare in response to immunisation. The chance of anaphylaxis in children and adolescents has been reported as less than one per one million doses. The vaccine components that are very rarely associated with allergic reactions are gelatin and yeast. People who are allergic to eggs should not receive flu or yellow fever vaccines.

Children or adults with most food or environmental allergies, such as dust mite or hayfever, can be safely vaccinated. The only exception to this is where a person has an allergy to any specific component in a vaccine.