

Physician, Vaccinate Thyself Against Flu

BY HEIDI SPLETE

WASHINGTON – Flu vaccination rates in the United States are up, and more health care professionals are leading by example, Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said at a press conference.

The annual flu vaccine is never perfect, but “we can say with certainty that the best way to protect yourself, your family, and your community is to get a flu shot,” Dr. Frieden said.

About 90 million doses of vaccine are now available, and 170 million doses are expected this year, he said. Availability of the flu vaccine should not be a concern this year, and now is a great time for health care professionals and the public to get their flu vaccines, he added.

Last year, 43% of Americans aged 6 months and older were vaccinated; 8 million more than the previous year, and more than ever before, Dr. Frieden said. The recommendations are the same as last year: “Everyone aged 6 months and older should get the flu vaccine, this year and every year,” he said. Flu shots are necessary each year, even though the strains of flu in this year’s vaccine and the viruses seen so far this year are the same as for the 2010-2011 season, he added.

“You need this year’s flu shot to

protect you against this year’s flu,” he said. One shot protects against the flu for the duration of the season, but protection wanes and can’t be expected to carry over year to year, he said.

This year, four types of flu vaccine are available: the traditional intramuscular injection, a nasal spray, a high-dose injection for adults aged 65 years and older, and a new intradermal vaccine with a barely noticeable needle, approved for use in those aged 18-64 years.

About 51% of children in the United States received a flu vaccine last year, a 7% increase over the previous year, Dr. Frieden noted. Although the news on vaccination rates is encouraging, “It is critical to continue to make progress; there are too many illnesses and deaths from influenza each year,” he said.

Pediatricians have an important role to play in raising these rates higher, said Dr. O. Marion Burton, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

“Pediatricians are normally the first, and sometimes the only contact that some families have with a health care provider,” said Dr. Burton. “Every child needs



CDC Director Thomas Frieden rolled up his sleeve for a flu shot at a recent press conference as part of the “leading by example” initiative.

an influenza vaccine if they are 6 months of age or older,” he said. The only contraindication is for children who have had Guillain-Barré syndrome after an immunization in the past, he said. Children with a moderate to high fever or febrile illness should not be vaccinated until the fever subsides, he said. Children aged 6 months to 8 years who received one dose of flu vaccine last year need only one dose this year, because the vaccine formula is the same, said Dr. Burton. But children aged 6 months to 8 years who are being vaccinated for the first time this year should receive

two doses at least 4 weeks apart.

Dr. William Schaffner, president of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID), noted that vaccination rates are up among health care workers and that doctors are getting better about recommending flu vaccination to their patients.

A total of 68% of adults said that a health care professional recommended that they get a flu vaccination this year, up from 58% in 2010 and 38% in 2008, according to a nationwide telephone survey of 1,006 adults conducted by the NFID. About 60% of adults who were vacci-

nated last year said that they did so because a health care professional recommended it.

Last year, 63.5% of health care workers were vaccinated. But there is room for improvement, Dr. Schaffner said. “There are a lot of health care professionals who still don’t understand that it’s a patient safety issue,” he noted. “And among some health care professionals, there is that persistent myth that you can get the flu from the flu vaccine, which is incorrect,” he said.

Leadership from the top is essential to improving vaccination rates in health care professionals, Dr. Schaffner said. For example, “A strong senior administrator who makes it clear that we are going to make our hospital environment absolutely as safe as possible for our patients,” which means that flu vaccination is expected, “is essential for increasing flu vaccination among health care professionals,” he said.

To encourage vaccination this year, the NFID introduced a “leading by example” initiative that calls on health care professionals and community and business leaders to get vaccinated themselves.

The press conference was sponsored by the NFID. For updates on the 2011-2012 flu season, visit www.cdc.gov/flu or www.flu.gov. ■

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