

Longer Season for Influenza Vaccination Urged

BY ALICIA AULT

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WASHINGTON — For the second year in a row, federal officials and professional societies are urging health care providers to administer influenza vaccination beyond the traditional months of October and November.

A record number of doses will be available, they said at a press briefing highlighting persistent gaps in vaccination coverage for the most vulnerable populations—children and the elderly. The officials also encouraged providers to be more aggressive in offering pneumococcal vaccine to patients over age 65.

Influenza leads to 36,000 deaths and 200,000 hospitalizations each year. It disproportionately affects the very young, and those with chronic disease. For instance, influenza may trigger up to 92,000 cardiac deaths per year, according to the National Foundation for Infec-

tious Diseases, which sponsored the briefing.

Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said that manufacturers are on track to deliver about 132 million doses of influenza vaccine this season, which would be the largest amount of vaccine ever produced. Although manufacturers could run into problems delivering those doses, as has happened in the past, “every indication is that the supply is not going to be the rate-limiting step for us,” she said.

The biggest hurdle in raising vaccination rates is misperceptions among providers and patients, she and others noted during the briefing.

Many patients mistakenly believe that influenza vaccination causes illness. “It does not cause flu in any way, shape, or form,” Dr. Gerberding said, calling on physicians to help dispel this myth.

Influenza vaccination rates are below goal for high-risk patients aged 18-49

(30%), healthy adults aged 50-64 (37%), and all adults over age 65 (69%), according to data from the 2005-2006 flu season, which was presented by Dr. Jeanne M. Santoli, deputy director of the Immunization Services Division at the CDC’s National Center for Immunization. During the 2005-2006 flu season, only 21% of children aged 6 months to 2 years received the two doses required for full vaccination coverage. The rates were published in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (2007 Sept. 21;56[37]:953-9).

CMS Acting Administrator Kerry Weems pointed out that Medicare recipients can receive flu shots free of charge. Medicare reimbursement for the shots will increase 5% in the upcoming season, to \$13.22 for the most-used version and \$17.37 for the preservative-free shot. The administration fee, which will be \$19.33 in 2007, has not yet been calculated for 2008, Mr. Weems said.

Dr. Ardis Hoven, an infectious disease specialist and member of the American Medical Association’s Board of Trustees, urged providers to extend their time frame for vaccination. Health care providers typically focus their vaccination efforts during October and November, but influenza usually peaks in February. Doses often remain available after November but go unused.

In 2006, 120 million doses were produced and 102 million were distributed, Dr. Santoli said.

“Health care professionals and their patients must work together to make sure every opportunity to discuss influenza immunization... is used,” Dr. Hoven said.

Health care workers, including physicians, have almost the lowest rates of vaccination. The CDC does not have data for the 2005-2006 flu season, but over the 10 previous seasons, only about 40% of health workers were vaccinated annually, Dr. Santoli said. ■

FDA Approves Nasal Flu Vaccine For Children Aged 2-5 Years

BY ALICIA AULT

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The Food and Drug Administration approved the nasal influenza vaccine FluMist for children aged 2-5 years, which could help push up childhood vaccination rates.

FluMist manufacturer MedImmune Inc. said that it anticipated shipping the vaccine to physicians and health care providers almost immediately.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently recommends that all children aged 6 months to 5 years be vaccinated against influenza. The trivalent FluMist vaccine has previously been approved only for healthy children over age 5 years and for adults aged 18-49 years.

Dr. Sarah Long, chief of infectious diseases at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children in Philadelphia, said that the new FluMist approval is likely to spur higher vaccination rates. But, she added, physicians probably will not widely use the vaccine in young children until the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends it for the approved populations.

Without an ACIP endorsement, insurers are reluctant to reimburse for a vaccine, Dr. Long, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics committee on infectious diseases, said in an interview.

That recommendation is likely to come at ACIP’s next meeting in late October, as FluMist’s likely approval for use in young children had been discussed at its last meeting, Dr. Long said.

The AAP and the CDC agree that children of all ages are vastly undervaccinated. The CDC just issued vaccination statistics on children aged 6-23 months.

Overall, only 21% of children under the age of 2 years received full vaccination coverage—that is, two doses—in the 2005-2006 flu season, Dr. Jeanne M. Santoli, deputy director of the Immunization Services Division in the CDC’s National Immunization Program, said at a press briefing on the upcoming flu season convened by the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases that occurred as the FluMist approval was granted.

FluMist joins two other vaccines currently approved for use in young children. Sanofi Pasteur’s Fluzone is indicated for anyone over 6 months of age, and Novartis’ Fluvirin for anyone aged 4 years or older.

But only FluMist offers the ease of nasal administration. “This approval also offers parents and health professionals a needle-free option for squeamish toddlers, who may be reluctant to get a traditional influenza shot,” said Dr. Jesse L. Goodman, director of the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research in a statement.

The approval was based on a pivotal study of 4,000 children aged 2-5 years who received the live attenuated vaccine during the 2004-2005 flu season. According to MedImmune, there was a 54% reduction in influenza in children given FluMist, compared with those who received a traditional injection.

The FluMist vaccine is contraindicated in those with asthma, children under age 2 years, and children under age 5 years who have recurrent wheezing because there is an increased risk of exacerbation of that symptom. It also should not be given to children receiving concomitant aspirin, or therapy containing aspirin, according to MedImmune.

The company will charge \$17.95 per dose this flu season. ■

Less Than Quarter of Children Under 2 Years Get Flu Vaccine

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

New York Bureau

Influenza vaccination of children aged 6-23 months remains low, with only 21% of children in this age group being fully vaccinated against influenza during the 2005-2006 season, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The vaccination rate was similar for the 24-59 months group—recently added to groups officially recommended to receive influenza vaccine—in preliminary data from the 2006-2007 season.

Results from the 2006 National Immunization Survey found that 32% of children aged 6-23 months received at least one dose of the vaccine in the 2005-2006 season and 21% were fully vaccinated in accordance with recommendations from the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP).

The data reflect vaccination uptake in the second season since ACIP began recommending annual influenza vaccination for children aged 6-23 months in 2004. The results are based on a sample of 13,546 children from across the country (MMWR 2007;56:959-63).

The 2005-2006 coverage levels were similar to those reported during the previous influenza season.

The national estimate for fully vaccinated children increased from 18% in 2004-2005 to 21% in 2005-2006. For children who received at least one dose of the vaccine, the rate fell from 33% in 2004-2005 to 32% in 2005-2006.

In addition to the national figures, CDC also analyzed state vaccination rates and found significant variation.

For example, the percentage of children who received at least one dose of influenza vaccine ranged from a low of 8%

in Mississippi to a high of 53% in Connecticut. No state had more than 40% of children fully vaccinated, according to the study.

CDC researchers also took an early look at influenza vaccination rates for the 2006-2007 season using data from six immunization information system sentinel sites, located in Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Oregon, and the District of Columbia.

Researchers used the data from the sentinel sites to gauge compliance with a June 2006 ACIP recommendation, which called for routine influenza vaccination among children aged 6-59 months. The early data revealed that at all six sites less than 30% of children aged 6-23 months had been fully vaccinated and less than 20% of children aged 24-59 months were fully vaccinated against influenza during the 2006-2007 season (MMWR 2007; 56:963-5). ■

