

Preparing yourself for this year's flu season

BY REBECCA GREENE

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Hearing these flu shot excuses lately? "I've never had the flu, so I don't bother," "Every time I get that shot, it makes me sick," or "It doesn't work anyway."

These excuses are weak, says Richard Krieger, MD, an infectious disease specialist and the chairman of the Infection Prevention Committee at Chilton Medical Center.

For those who have never had the flu, the doctor has advice.

"Bet they change their minds if they get it just once," he said. "I got it years ago and it's just pure misery."

The single most important thing you can do to avoid the flu, Krieger said, "aside from locking yourself up with no people around," is to get the flu shot.

The strain of flu changes every year.

"The flu virus changes fairly frequently," he said. "It's the outer shell of the virus that changes and gets to our immune system."

Professionals refer to this change as either a "drift" or a "shift."

A drift is when there are minor changes to the virus.

But a shift is when there are major changes and pandemics occur, such as the swine flu or the bird flu.

He described the changes as similar to when a person sees a black bear and knows how to act

to get away unscathed.

"But if you see a white polar bear, you're not sure how to act," he said. "It's still a bear, but it looks somewhat different and the same things you could do to chase away a black bear won't work with a white polar bear."

Krieger said it is the same way our bodies see the flu virus. When the body does not recognize the virus right away, the body gets sick until it learns how to stave the virus off.

The flu shot is the equivalent of building up an army against the virus. It takes about two weeks or so to take effect.

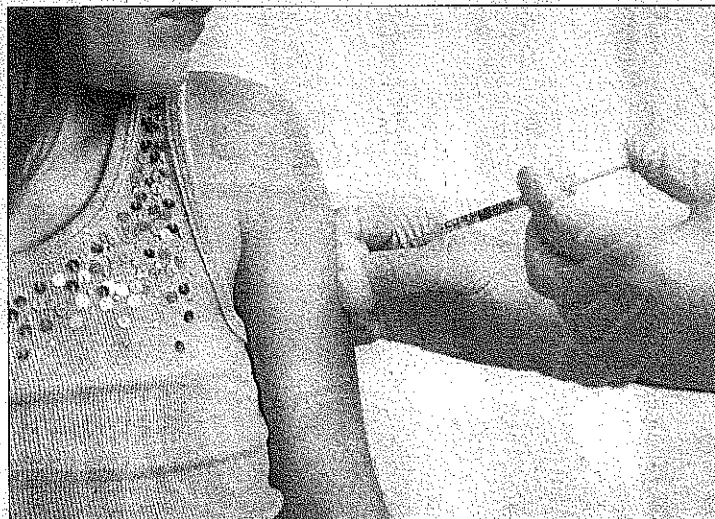
But since the flu changes from year to year, the shot changes, as well. But what type of flu it should combat, that's an educated guess, Krieger said.

"It's something we can't predict," he said. "It's a crap shoot. Since it takes months to develop and produce a vaccine, we can't wait until we see what strain it is. It will be too late to vaccinate people against it."

This year, he said, the government has combined the vaccine to combat H1N1, the swine flu, and H3N3, a more common type of flu.

"If the flu changes more than 50 percent, it won't combat the flu very well, but that's a rare occurrence," he said.

It is especially important for those who are older, younger, or have compromised immune systems to get the shot.



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Wondering if you should get a flu shot this year? Experts say yes and have more than a few reasons why.

"For these groups, getting sick could be deadly, so the shot is very important," he said.

On occasion, he said, the shot produces allergic reactions in people and can cause partial paralysis for a period of time.

"Again, this is very, very rare," Krieger said. "There's more risk in walking into the street every day."

Got the flu anyway

So, what if you get the flu, in spite of precautions? Recent news reports called into question drugs such as Tamiflu, administered when the flu is in its first 48 hours.

"Yes, it works," he said. "It can

at least make the flu less harsh, which is a big deal."

The version of the flu serum that comes in a mist is a live virus, as opposed to the shot, which is a dead virus. The live virus cannot be given to risk groups or to someone who is already not well with a cold or other sickness.

"It can make them feel worse," he said. "But that's only true for the live virus."

The vaccine takes two weeks to take effect, and the life of the vaccine is approximately four months, which is why most people get their shots in October. It gets them through the winter when people tend to get sick

because their bodies are run down from the cold.

Aside from getting the shot to prevent the flu, the doctor said the Centers for Disease Control recommendations are good to follow.

The CDC suggests getting the annual flu shot and trying to avoid close contact with sick people to reduce the possibility of getting sick. While sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.

If you are sick with flu-like illness, the CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities. Your fever should be gone for 24 hours without the use of a fever-reducing medicine.

Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.

Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.

Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Germs spread this way.

Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated with germs like the flu.

And if the doctor recommends a remedy to shorten the flu, an anti-viral medication, take it. It is different from antibiotics. It can make the symptoms milder and reduce the length of time a person is sick.