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Vaccines – The Benefits Outweigh the Risks

Allergy/CF/Huntington's/Medic Alert/Fitness/Speech & Hearing Month

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada between 10 and 20 percent of Canadians will get infected with influenza each year. Most people recover well but about 12, 200 hospitalizations due to influenza occur each year and about 3,500 deaths. The annual seasonal influenza vaccine is considered the frontline defense against getting the flu.

Predication Not an Exact Science

Well, the data is being crunched, but you probably don't need to hear it to know that our battle against influenza this past season was pretty much a bust! The statistics show that the vaccine was only about 23% effective – compared to the usual rate of about 60%. Predicting the best vaccine components can be imperfect. Unfortunately, this year the dominant strain, responsible for about 2/3 of circulating influenza A, was not included in the vaccine.

Getting It Right for 2015/16 Flu Season

Planning is underway for the 2015/16 flu vaccine and, due to the emergence of A/Switzerland as a dominant strain, it is likely there will be a significant change to the components this year. A change also looks possible for the influenza B strain - B/Phuket is emerging as the possible candidate. The second A strain will probably remain as A/California. A/Switzerland is a H3N2 type, which tends to cause worse illness and is associated with higher mortality rates.

Are Vaccines Effective for Older Adults?

It appears that, perhaps, our immune systems are not immune to the effects of aging. The elderly often have a lower immune response to vaccinations, such as the flu vaccine. A recent study examined this effect and utilized higher doses of flu vaccine in hopes of compensating. The result? The high-dose vaccines definitely produced a more robust antibody level – but more investigation is needed to determine the clinical outcomes of this response.

Childhood Vaccines are Safe and Beneficial

A systematic review of childhood vaccines has been conducted to examine adverse effects and the results overwhelmingly support that the benefits outweigh the risks. This isn't to say that there are no adverse events, but that they are very rare. Commissioned by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the report found strong evidence of no relationship to autism or leukemia for vaccines such as MMR, DTaP, Hib and hepatitis B.

Much is made of the “art” of medicine, but the best medical decisions are based on facts and evidence. Your pharmacist can help you wade through the sea of information and separate the fact from the fiction.