Can I Get Sick From the Influenza Vaccine?

What causes the flu?
The common flu is a viral illness caused by the influenza virus. Influenza, like many other viruses is composed of two main components, proteins and ribonucleic acid (RNA). These viruses can invade our cells, replicate and make us sick.

The picture to the right represents the influenza virus. It depicts 2 proteins, the green triangles and blue rectangles. The squiggly grey lines represent the RNA. All viruses need both RNA (or DNA) and protein to invade and replicate in human cells.

Why do so many people think that influenza vaccination makes them sick?
The influenza vaccine does not contain live or weakened virus; therefore it cannot make you sick with the flu. The influenza vaccine is administered during the fall and winter seasons when there is a high number of viruses other than influenza. People who receive the flu vaccine are still susceptible to rhinovirus, adenoviruses, coronaviruses, respiratory syncytial virus and metapneumovirus; all of which are more prevalent in the fall or winter.

Further, the influenza vaccine is not 100% effective at preventing the flu. It’s effectiveness varies year to year based on the formulation of the flu vaccine (graph below). Some people who receive the vaccine may still contract influenza.

Why should you consider getting the influenza vaccine?

Influenza is a serious illness in the state of Vermont. Getting vaccinated not only protects you but can protect your family and neighbors, some of whom may have weakened or compromised immune systems.

Every year hundreds of Vermonters are hospitalized because of influenza. This leads to millions of dollars in medical expenditures. Receiving the flu shot can help reduce suffering, mortality and medical expenditures in your community!

“The influenza vaccine does not contain live or weakened virus; therefore it cannot make you sick”

How does the influenza vaccine protect you?
The influenza vaccine works by exposing your immune system to the proteins on the outside of the influenza virus. If you contact the influenza virus after being vaccinated your body is able to recognize and mount a swift response to the flu. The vaccine contains only the surface proteins and cannot make you sick with the flu (depicted above). There are no live or weakened forms of the virus in the injectable form of the flu vaccine.

Why should get a flu shot?
The Vermont Department of Health and CDC recommends that everyone older than 6 months should receive influenza vaccination yearly.

People who should not get the vaccine are those under 6 months of age and those who have had severe allergies to eggs.

Consult your doctor or healthcare provider if you have concerns about receiving the vaccine or have had reactions to vaccinations in the past.

Published by medical students of the Robert Larner M.D. College of Medicine at the University of Vermont