

Most young kids need flu shot, experts say

Written by Associated Press

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WASHINGTON - Far too few young children get annual flu shots, particularly those who are most at risk of serious illness or death because they have asthma or other chronic diseases.

A survey released Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that only about one-third of children between age 6 months and 2 years get a flu vaccination. A different survey, conducted by state health departments, says about 48 percent of children in that same age group are getting their flu vaccine.

"The real message is, no matter what survey you look at, we're nowhere near protecting the number of children that we're supposed to," said Dr. Jeanne Santoli, a pediatrician at the CDC. This year, medical experts have expanded the age range of children who should be vaccinated. Health officials now say children between 6 months and 5 years should get flu shots; previously the range was 6 months to 2 years. Many parents may not be aware of the change.

Regardless of age, if children have such chronic conditions as asthma or diabetes, they should get a flu vaccine. However, only about a third of children in the high-risk categories do.

The primary reason for the low vaccination rates is that many Americans don't take flu seriously. Less than half of the people who responded to a consumer survey plan to be immunized against the flu this year, says the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases. Of that group, 43 percent did not think the flu was serious enough to warrant vaccination.

Many others, 46 percent, worried that getting a vaccine would cause them to get sick. Occasionally, people getting the vaccine experience a mild fever and fatigue for a day, but recipients cannot get the flu from the vaccine. "That's a very persistent myth, but a myth nonetheless," said Dr. William Schaffner, a professor at Vanderbilt University.

This year, a vaccine shortage won't be a credible excuse for failure to get a shot. More than 100 million doses of vaccine will be available - the most ever. The dosages are available as a shot or through nasal spray.

"Vaccine that remains in the refrigerator cannot prevent influenza," Schaffner said.

The stakes are high when it comes to the flu, said officials who attended a press conference designed to raise awareness of the illness. It kills about 36,000 people each year and puts more than 200,000 people in the hospital. Most of the deaths and serious cases are among the elderly.

Officials noted that the government pays for influenza vaccination for Medicare beneficiaries, yet only about two-thirds of seniors get a flu vaccine. The vaccine is one way the Bush administration is trying to get beneficiaries to focus on preventing disease, said Dr. Mark McClellan, administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

"What we have here is another example of a prevention gap," McClellan said.

Officials are also trying to get the word out to families that children ages 2 to 5 have been added to the list of groups that should get vaccinated.

For that age group, officials noted the flu leads to a higher rate of clinic and emergency room visits than do other illnesses.

While children under the age of 6 months should not get vaccinated, it's important that their siblings and parents do. First-ever vaccination of a young child requires two separate doses.

Other priority groups for vaccination include: all people 50 and older, all people with chronic conditions such as diabetes and AIDS who are older than 6 months of age, all pregnant women and all health care workers.

Each year, reports of a vaccine shortage invariably flare up as doctors report not being able to get all of the vaccine that they ordered the previous February. Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the CDC, said there is often a mismatch in the early part of the season with some health care providers getting too many doses, and some not enough. However, overall, there should be plenty of vaccine this year.