

Steve: Are you protected?

welcome to SBH Bronx health talk produced by SBH health system and broadcast from the beautiful studios at St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Stephen Clark.

Fall just arrived and yet flu season is already lurking around the corner or maybe it never left. The flu is a contagious respiratory illness that can cause mild to severe distress comparing it to the common cold is like comparing a house cat with a bobcat serious outcome of flu can result in hospitalization even death. older people young children and those with compromised health are most at risk to give you an example of how serious SBH takes the flu we have a couple of real heavy hitters with us today to discuss it Dr. Ed Telzak, chair of the department of medicine and Dr. Judith Berger the hospital's director of division of infectious diseases. welcome doctors.

Dr. Telzak: Thank you.

Steve: Let me start with you Dr. Berger from what I've been hearing it seems that the 2018-2019 flu season never really left, right?

Dr. Berger: That's true it really hasn't. Usually after May we don't see cases until again September October November but this year we had cases in June July and August which is very unusual.

Steve: Why do you think is there a reason for it just about to happen eventually?

Dr. Berger: I think some flu is able to survive in the summertime for instance in the 2009 season of the swine flu the h1n1 we had a lot of cases in the summertime, but we really don't know exactly which virus this is we know we've had both A and B but the exact strain we don't know.

Steve: I read somewhere that the flu vaccine is the best protection we have and yet the chances of getting the flu with the vaccine only drop by 47% this past year to a layman that seems low Dr. Telzak.

Dr. Telzak: So you know I think it's important to emphasize the magnitude of the flu and so in a very predictable way every year millions upon millions of people get the flu it's an epidemic every year there are occasional cases in the summer which are unusual but come the fall and the winter and early spring millions of people get the flu hundreds of thousands of people are hospitalized from the flu and tens of thousands of people die so when you say that there's only 47% of 50% efficacy you're still impacting millions of lives billions of dollars ICU stays that would otherwise occur but with the flu vaccine likely don't occur so I think the magnitude of the impact is enormous and very few vaccines in fact have that magnitude obviously we would want a higher rate of efficacy of the flu vaccine but I wouldn't dismiss 47% as not being important I think it makes an enormous difference.

Dr. Berger: I think efficacy is showing that the person did not get the flu if they got the vaccine but it's not counting for us not to tell success the decrease in severity of illness the decrease in hospitalizations the decrease in ICU stays and the decrease in death so I think the vaccine protects you against severe disease and that's the reason to get it

Steve: What do you think prevents people from getting the flu vaccine?

Dr. Berger: I think first of all there's a lot of bad press about vaccines to begin with so the flu vaccine is surely included in that there are people that feel that they get sick from the flu vaccine and they make the mistake of thinking that they got the flu from the vaccine where the vaccine is not a live virus and cannot give you the flu and sometimes you because it takes time for the antibody to form after the vaccine you can get the flu within the first few weeks after you've gotten the vaccine.

Steve: I guess most people are candidates for the vaccine right there very few people who wouldn't qualify for it correct?

Dr. Berger: Everybody over the age of six months is able to get the vaccine and is suggested that they get the vaccine there are very few contraindications.

Dr. Telzak: I would just comment that I think in medicine in general bad news has a very long tail and so there have been instances where there have been suggestions of pretty severe side effects from the flu vaccine but that hasn't happened in more than a decade so there is for example one entity called guillain-barre syndrome that happened you know 20 years ago, that keeps on coming up for a reason why people don't want to get the flu vaccine other than the main reason is they think the flu vaccine might give that in the flu which I think is absolutely not possible but the severe consequences are very unlikely to be due to the flu vaccine in and up itself and some of the estimates that I've read about the increase in the studies that have shown an increase it's to the tune of one to two cases per million shots of flu vaccine whereas the numbers of illness hospitalizations ICUs and deaths per million is logarithmically higher than these very very potential rare consequences of the flu vaccine.

Steve: Now someone makes a decision beginning of every flu season as to what is going to contain right?

Dr. Berger: That's correct.

Steve: The actual vaccine? And that's based on what?

Dr. Berger: That's based on what has been circulating in the community in the last season.

Steve: And yet last year it changed right? Beginning to the end?

Dr. Berger: Yes, so this vaccine that we have this year the flu A's are two flu A's and two flu

B's in the vaccine. The two A's are little bit different than last year's vaccine the two flu B's are the same.

Dr. Telzak: Just to comment it's the nature of the virus is that it's always shifting it's always changing it's called drift and shift, but the antigens and the virus are moving around with some degree of frequency and that generally is felt to be on an annual basis but even during a flu epidemic there can be shift and drift of the virus where the flu vaccine might have only partial beneficial effects or even no effects if that happens during the flu vaccine.

Steve: Right and how again if you had a flu shot last spring are you good to go or you need another flu shot?

Dr. Berger: No, you need a flu shot at the beginning of each season, so the season begins in September.

Steve: Okay, right.

Dr. Telzak: And that would I had said that would be for two reasons one is because the virus changes and so you know there are a group of flu scientists there are hundreds of flu scientists who work very hard at figuring out what are the likely strains of flu that are going to affect North America during the period of time of the flu season and then immunity decreases over time and so you really need an annual injection to make sure you have adequate immunity and in fact there's now considerable controversy about when's the optimal time to receive a flu shot if you do it too early you might lose efficacy towards the end of flu season so you really need to be revaccinated on at least an annual basis.

Steve: So again, should we get flu shots now? Is now the right time you think?

Dr. Berger: Well I think based on our experience during this past summer of seeing the flu I think now is the time to get the vaccine.

Steve: So the early fall is the best time.

Dr. Berger: Yes.

Dr. Telzak: I would go with that.

Steve: For somebody who is, I hear this all the time sure you do too if someone says well you know "I'm 50 years old I'm in great health there's really no reason for me to get a flu shot", what do you say to him?

Dr. Berger: I think that even although people with underlying diseases you know diabetes, heart disease, pregnancy, young children, all older people many other you know comorbidities other diseases that people have malignancies HIV etc are more prone to severe disease because they

do not produce enough antibody to protect themselves I think that we do see severe disease even in those that are 50 years old and otherwise healthy.

Steve: Okay so what else in addition to getting the flu shot what else can you do to minimize your likelihood of getting the flu?

Dr. Telzak: I think you can make sure that any healthcare providers that you see have been vaccinated and so we at St. Barnabas are, that's one of our major public health efforts for the institution is to make sure that every person is vaccinated or wears a mask so if you happen to come here you can feel secure that the overwhelming majority of individuals here have received the flu vaccine I think having your family vaccinated so that you're not bringing flu into the close quarters of a household your work environment and courage work environments to bring flu vaccine into that kind of environment you want your micro environments to not introduce flu and the best way to do that is to make sure as many people as possible get the vaccine.

Steve: I know you see people today and you look at I'm like what's a little bit OCD where they they wipe their tables or their desk clean every day with some kind of cleaner is that a good idea or is that overkill?

Dr Berger: Well I think that might be overkill because you're the person who uses your desk not necessarily other people so I think sharing phones common phones in offices in hospitals and other places using you know pets for credit cards in in pharmacies and supermarkets I think there are common you know objects that we all use.

Steve: So, what do you do you? wear gloves what do you do?

Dr. Berger: No, I don't think so but the first thing I think you have to try to train yourself is to keep your hands down from your eyes your nose in your mouth where you might have flu on your hands and then inoculate yourself I think that you should wash your hands more often or use hand sanitizer when you do come out of a public area and I think also maybe during high flu season not to shake hands.

Steve: Are there any home remedies that you can do to booster your immunity or to reduce the likelihood of getting the flu?

Dr. Telzak: You know, I think you don't need a home remedy you need to take the flu shot. I think that is the best protection that you could have. Flu shots are readily available and in a multiplicity of sites and pharmacies a doctor's office and work environments you just need to get the flu shot. Another thing I would say in terms of protecting yourself protecting your family is that people that become ill during flu season should stay at home they should not come to work they should not go to a hospital they should not go to a doctor's office unless they are very very sick that's how you know it takes a sick person spreading flu or sometimes a not

sick person spreading flu but certainly a sick person spreading flu to infect other people and so if you're sick if you have respiratory symptoms fever, a cough or sore throat you should not go to work until it's over sometimes you may get flu tested usually you won't, but you should stay home.

Steve: I've always wondered again from a layman's perspective you're in an elevator and someone with the flu sneezes does everyone get infected?

Dr. Berger: No, I don't think so I don't think it's a hundred percent transmission, but I do think that everyone should be encouraged to cover their cough in order not to transmit.

Steve: Are their early signs of the flu that you should be aware of and if it happens it can you do anything about it?

Dr. Telzak: I think one of the you know one of the great challenges of influenza is that people can spread the virus for a day or two before they're actually sick so that's a you know that's a something that just needs to be dealt with in terms of if someone does get sick and they're it's clear they have the flu and they're in a hospital setting for example then and they've seen a lot of patients then patients need to be what's called prophylaxis to receive medication to prevent them from getting the flu if they've had close contact with someone who is either asymptomatic or symptomatic and turn out to have the flu. I think if you do have an underlying illness and you develop signs of symptoms of the flu you should seek medical care right away because the antiviral treatments that are used for flu can have a very important impact on ultimately how sick you get and the level of care that you might need and can actually impact mortality so it is very important if you have an underlying disease at the first suggestion of influenza that you seek medical care on the other hand if you're a perfectly healthy person no underlying disease and you develop mild symptoms of the flu you're probably better off staying at home you don't need to go into a doctor's office expose people and probably prophylaxis or medication intervention will have a much less beneficial impact than if you're if you have an underlying disease.

Steve: So you shouldn't get treatments you should just stay home and suck it up? I'm not sure if I am understanding it.

Dr. Telzak: So what I would say is if you're an otherwise healthy person and you're of the right age group you're not pregnant you don't have any of the risk factors for severe disease I would say that if you have mild disease you should stay at home it's also assuming that everyone in your household is you know in a similar state of good health without the other risk factors yes I think sucking it up would be one way of characterizing it rather than going into an environment where there are lots of sick people and spreading the flu.

Dr. Berger: I do think we should stress though that the antivirals that we have the medications that we have the flu do work and they work best within 48 hours of your having symptoms so I think that that's the time to pick up the phone and speak to the doctor especially if you're not

severely ill and perhaps speak to the doctor about getting antivirals or not and I think also it's very important to note that those antivirals also work to prevent what we call prophylaxis to prevent the flu and if there are people in your household that could be at risk for severe disease and someone else in the household has a flu, they can receive antivirals to prevent their getting the flu I think that's an important point.

Steve: That's a very good. I just want to change gears a little bit now because she's running out of time. I was in the pharmacy a couple weeks ago and they had a big sign out for shingles they're talking about the shingles vaccine and if you're over 16 you should consider it what do you think about that?

Dr. Berger: The shingles vaccine at this point is a good vaccine in the sense that it's not a live virus which is better than the older vaccine and I think it should be given to people to prevent shingles this particular vaccine does have side effects people can have fever and aches and pains and feel like they have to get into bed and so should just know that ahead of time.

Steve: Because what I found interesting is that I know while private insurance covers the shingle shot which is not inexpensive, Medicare does not.

Dr. Telzak: Right so I think a lot of private insurance really follows the lead of Medicare some many private insurances in fact don't cover the vaccine it's expensive and there have been real production issues of the vaccine so there were many pharmacists and pharmacies and hospitals that in fact cannot get the vaccine so but you know in my estimation it's a highly efficacious vaccine shingles can be an extremely debilitating infection and I would counsel people of a certain age to you know if they can afford it or to get the vaccine if they have access to it.

S: Okay well we're running out of time I want to thank you both for being here today now you have very busy schedules for more information on services available in SBH health system visit www.sbhny.org and thank you for joining us.