

So now we have to worry about the flu?

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 Steven Clark.

This has been a year like none other. Nearly 200,000 Americans have died from the novel coronavirus. Millions have been infected. The virus has taken over every aspect of our lives – our work, schools, hospitals, transportation, entertainment. Life itself. And many experts believe that it's not going away anytime soon and could very well return this fall with a vengeance. It won't end until we have an effective vaccine. So now with flu season approaching do we really care about getting a flu shot? Doesn't that seem like worrying about a little rain when we just survived the monsoon?

With us today to discuss the flu is Dr. Judy Berger, director of the division of infectious diseases at SBH Health System. Welcome Dr. Berger.

I'm guessing that while many of us, most of all people like yourself, have been obsessed with coronavirus since March we shouldn't take our eye off the ball when it comes to the flu, right? Why is it that if we haven't gotten a flu shot in the past for whatever reason is this the year we should?

Well you know that I think that we should get it every year but I think that this year has extra importance. You know the symptoms of the flu are very similar to the symptoms of Covid. Perhaps we don't see the mortality that we see with Covid although there is some mortality and definitely morbidity particularly in high-risk patients, but because the symptoms are similar one cannot tell which one you have or maybe you have both and we have seen both so I think it's very important that a person not have a sore throat, not have congestion, not have a cough, not have a fever or muscle pains or body aches because we won't be able to tell the difference and I think also having both together could worsen the disease.

Okay so again I guess what you're saying is that there is a possibility if you get the flu you may be more susceptible to coronavirus?

Well you may be more susceptible to the complications because flu itself you know has complications, secondary infections including bacterial pneumonia so I think if you already have compromise of your respiratory symptom, your Covid might be worse.

Why do you think people are shy about getting a flu shot in general> Historically why do they say well not this year or make excuses not to get one?

Well, I think also there is a lot of misconception. I think that people, many people still think you get the flu from the flu shot or that you'll get sick from the flu shot. Somebody might say well I don't get the flu, I haven't had bad flu so why should I take it, I feel sick from the flu shot oh or they'll say I heard in the news that it's not that efficacious. It doesn't work so well why should I get it? So I think there are many misconceptions.

Okay and I think the last one you mentioned that it's not that effective and every year we hear that it's only what 47 or 52 percent or whatever still is the best thing we have right about preventing the flu?

Absolutely. I still think that even remember that each strain actually in the vaccine and there are four. There's a different efficacy for each one of them actually. Not only that some higher and some lower but even at an efficacy of 40 percent we still see prevention in the country of illness, hospitalizations and deaths.

And you're already seeing cases of the flu, right?

Yes we had one yesterday.

Okay so I guess that means you shouldn't wait too long to get a flu shot, all things being equal, right?

Right. I think that this year I think getting the flu shot early might be good. You know there is some there is some decrease in antibodies as the season goes on and that's why some people feel maybe you should wait a little bit, get it later but it does take two weeks for the antibodies to form and for you to be

protected and I think this year in particular I think that getting the flu shot earlier is probably a good idea. First of all we never know when the flu season in quotes is going to start and as you see we're already seeing some so I think with Covid as well as seeing some already and wanting to protect us against the flu and the symptoms of the flu I think getting it earlier might be better this year.

I guess it's fair to say that there's no reason to think that because you get a flu shot you can't get the Covid vaccine should it be ready you know three, four, five months down the road?

That's correct there's no evidence that there's an interaction between these vaccines or getting one will prevent you getting the other or causing a decreased response to the other.

I believe you recommend the flu shot to all your patients but who in particular should make sure they get their flu shot this year?

Well, first of all health care workers so anybody who works in the hospital at all in any capacity should be getting the flu vaccine, but in addition people who are higher risk for complications of the flu and that includes people with underlying diseases, you know whether it's heart or kidney or liver or pulmonary you know respiratory disease have a higher risk of complications. Anyone who's immune suppressed, anyone who is obese. Somebody who's very overweight there is a higher risk both for complications of flu and Covid so I think that's an important group of people and we know that metabolic syndrome is surely higher in our populations including our health care workers so that group of people, the elderly and anybody who's over 50 really should be getting a flu shot and as you get older even more so.

Are there different flu shots for different people? I mean if you're older would you get a different flu shot than someone who's younger?

Yes so there is a vaccine that has a higher dose of the hemoglobin antigen in it

that is used for people 65 and older and this year there's actually been a change because up until this year it was a trivalent vaccine that was high dose meaning it only covered two flus A and one flu B but this year it's like the other vaccines that we give that it's quadrupling that it covers two A's and two B's.

Are there people who are allergic to getting flu shots and need to figure out something else to do?

So there are people that have egg allergies but really people with egg allergies most of them can get the vaccines without really any issue. It's people who have a very severe reaction to eggs that have a problem with the vaccine that's grown in yolk cells but we do have a vaccine that's called flu block. It's a recombinant vaccine and it's not grown in egg cells so they can get that vaccine without any issue at all and we do have that at the hospital yeah.

So there's really no excuse not to get a flu shot right?

Right unless somebody has had maybe Guillain-Barre within six weeks of a prior flu shot that might be one contraindication or some other unusual reaction that was severe but other than that there really is no reason.

Dr. Berger do you think the fact that most of us, especially in the New York City area, have been wearing masks for a long time now will that reduce the amount of flu that we see this year?

I think that's the hope. You know the flu is spread mostly respiratory and therefore if everybody is wearing a mask there should be less transmission of flu. Of course there are places where people don't wear masks and that includes their own you know their own homes and each of us goes out in the community and also you know compliance with masks. I think that we will see less flu because of the mask but I don't think we will see none.

I guess the flu shot is recommended for anyone over six months old right. Is that the limit?

Absolutely over six months of age.

Okay so what else can you do to minimize your chances of getting the flu this season?

So again I think that you know wearing masks for Covid will reduce the chances. I also think that staying home when you're sick, right. If you have a fever or you have a cold to stay home. In addition if you are here then you have to make sure that you are wearing that mask very diligently wherever you are. Also using gel or washing your hands frequently is a very important way to prevent viral infections because sometimes when we touch a surface we then rub our eyes or our nose or a mouth and then we have transmission as well. So I think especially if anybody is using a common phone or a common keyboard I think that wiping it down with disinfectant wipes before you use it is a very important way as well of preventing the flu.

As an infectious disease specialist have you come across any home remedies that can boost your immune system so again you're less likely to get the flu?

Not really. I think taking care of yourself is just the way.

Okay and again I guess you can get a flu shot in a lot of places. I mean we'll be offering here at St. Barnabas Hospital but also you can get them in most drug stores and anywhere right?

Absolutely and here at OHS whether or not your paycheck comes through St Barnabas or not if you work here there are free vaccines in occupational health.

Just to recount it I guess the most important thing is to say that unless you're in the very small percentage of those people who are allergic for one reason or another now is the time to go get a flu shot between now and I guess October middle of October, right?

That's correct.

Are you finding that your patients are talking about getting flu shots? Are they perhaps more eager this year than in past years because of what we've all been through?

Well I know that when I've done my visits recently as soon as I say that we have flu shots I think that people are coming in to get them.

And also one last thing. I know people talk about they're concerned about the side effects. I mean historically they're very minimal, right?

That's correct. You know we see a little bit of uh warmth, the redness at the site, you know pain at the site that lasts you know a few days at most and not much else.

And they're small needles right?

They're small enough so you shouldn't be afraid. It's well worth the effort or the minimal discomfort.

I definitely think so.

Okay Dr. Berger thank you for joining us on SBH Bronx Health Talk and hopefully it'll convince some more people to get flu shots this year.

I hope so.

For more information on services available at SBH Health System visit www.sbhny.org and thank you for joining us until next time.