

Vaccine is best bet for uncertain flu season

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Where to get flu shots

Low-cost flu shots are available through Monterey County at:• Seaside Family Health Center, 1150 Fremont Blvd., Seaside CA 93955. Hours: 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. • Alisal Health Center, 559 East Alisal St., Ste. 201, Salinas CA 93905. Hours: 8 to 11 a.m. and 1 to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. • Many pharmacies in Monterey County also offer flu shots, usually for about \$30. • National vaccine locator: <http://www.flu.gov/resources/widgets/index.html>

No healthy person has a good excuse to skip the flu vaccine this year: Vaccine manufacturers offer more options than ever, supplies

are plentiful and flu season is just weeks away.

The Monterey County Health Department has yet to see a single report of the flu, but cases will likely start showing up in late December, a department representative said. Because the government shutdown is interfering with flu surveillance, no one knows how severe this year's flu season will be. Now is the perfect time to get vaccinated.

Some people resist getting the vaccine because they fear that it will give them the flu. "That is a myth," said Angie Gladstone, immunization coordinator at the Monterey County Health Department. "It's impossible to get sick from the flu vaccine." When someone does experience a mild sore throat and body aches for 24 to 48 hours after receiving a flu shot, it's actually a good sign: the body is building up immunity against the flu.

A full-blown flu infection is unlikely to be missed, since it lasts three to five days and causes severe symptoms. If this occurs after receiving a vaccine, then it is likely that the person was already exposed to the virus.

Traditionally, the flu vaccine protects against three different strains of the flu virus, in what is called a trivalent vaccine. This year, a new quadrivalent vaccine is also available that protects against four strains. Only healthy people aged 2 to 49 years can receive the quadrivalent vaccine, and it is available as a nasal spray instead of as an injection.

Gladstone advises that all healthy people who do not have an egg allergy should take whatever vaccine is available. No one should pass up a dose just because he or she is waiting for the quadrivalent vaccine.

Most health insurance plans cover the cost of the vaccine, but it is available out-of-pocket for approximately \$30 at several drug stores. The County Health Department's Seaside Family Health Center and the Alisal Health Center both offer the trivalent vaccine for \$15.

People with egg allergies can finally receive the flu vaccine. Pharmaceutical companies traditionally

manufacture vaccines using chicken eggs, but a new type called FluBlok made by Protein Sciences is manufactured using mammal cells instead. People with egg allergies should consult their doctor about how to get the new vaccine.

Sometimes when a person gets vaccinated but then comes down with the flu later on, it's because the person contracted a strain of the virus that wasn't covered by the vaccine. There are a variety of different types of flu viruses that circulate, and only one or two strains become widespread at one time.

In January of each year, scientists predict which strains of the flu virus they think are likely to be the most common ones when flu season starts the next fall. They make this estimate so early because vaccine manufacturers take at least six months to develop the vaccine and to produce large enough quantities for public release.

During flu season, local public health departments and officials at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention monitor which viruses are making people sick, to see if the vaccine is a good match for the handful of strains that circulate through the population. But this year, as a result of the government shutdown, the CDC has halted its flu surveillance. It will likely be later in the year before officials know if the vaccine is completely effective.

Even if the scientists pick the wrong viruses, the vaccine still offers partial protection.

Flu season will soon be here, so remember to wash your hands, cover your mouth when you sneeze, and get the flu shot.